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"HORACE ASQUITH'S REJOINDER WAS PREVENTED BY THE OPENING OF THE
LIBRARY DOOR" (p. 28).

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GOLD

A Romance of Alondyke

BY

HEADON HILL.

*Author of "By a Hair's
Breadth," &c*

Francis Edward Branger

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS BY FRED PEGRAM

CASSELL AND COMPANY, LIMITED

LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK & MELBOURNE

1898

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SPECTRE GOLD.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE MILLIONAIRE.

A MAN dragged himself along the frozen floor to the entrance of a rude driftwood shelter, and sent his wolfish gaze ranging over the landscape. The range was not a wide one. Though it was but an hour after noon, the sun had already sunk below the pine-tops, and even the nearer distances were wrapped in the gloom of the coming Arctic winter. In the morning the first snow had fallen, and such light as there was came chiefly from the reflection of the ever-thickening white mantle that would cover the barren earth for months to come.

Limited as was the prospect, it had enough in it of the terror of utter solitude to draw a groan from the occupant of the hut.

On one side stretched the belt of pines that fringed and hid the mighty river; on the other lay an undulating snow-clad plain, covered as yet to no great depth, but effectually beleaguering the victim of a crushed ankle. Beyond the plain, dimly visible in skeleton outline only, a wall of mountains ran for some way parallel to the river and terminated sharply in one giant bald-headed bluff. But of man or of man's works there was no sign, and no sound of any living thing save the groan from the entry of the hut, provoked by the lack of other sights and sounds.

The groan brought on a piteous fit of coughing, and for some minutes the man lay panting, trying to subdue the rattle of his lungs. Then, slowly and painfully, he crawled back to the far end of the shelter and huddled close to the smouldering embers of a nearly burned-out fire. For a while he watched the expiring glow. Then, with an effort, he stretched out his hand for the two last remaining slabs of pine bark and placed them on the fire, fanning it into flame with his ragged hat.

"My last chance!" he murmured. "If no one sees the smoke before nightfall, I shall be wolf-meat to-morrow."

The smoke from the fresh fuel went wreathing through the chinks of the hut, causing him to cough again; but he fought down the jarring rattle as best he could, so that, hoping against hope, he might listen for the help that did not come. So he lay, holding his breath and listening, till it was too dark for there to be any chance of his smoke being seen. At length he uttered a cry of despair.

"I left it too late by a week," he moaned. "Every soul has cleared out of the country, and I'll lay there's no white man nearer than Circle City. It don't make no odds, perhaps. I've got my death-warrant, signed, sealed, and delivered, in my chest here, but I *did* want to die in good old Hampshire. Ay, and I wanted to look in Rupert Malahide's false face first, and to tell him that I died a richer man than he and hating him stronger than ever."

This human derelict, whose accent was

that of an Englishman, had not the air of belonging to the upper strata of society. In that rude solitude dress went for nothing; his rough hunting-shirt, topped by a threadbare velveteen coat, might have been worn there appropriately by peer or peasant, but his speech was marked by the broad "burr" common to the sons of the soil in rural Hampshire. Such of his features as were visible through the matted hair and beard were coarse and strongly marked; he was of great stature, but his naturally powerful frame was wasted by the ravages of disease; his eyes blazed with the brightness of far-advanced consumption.

"No, it's no go," he muttered again presently, when the slabs of bark had burned clear and the smoke had nearly ceased. "It is as black as pitch outside. Given there was any living creature hereabouts, there'd be no chance for me to be noticed. No food since yesterday, and now there's no more firing—a toss-up whether I starve or freeze first. Starve or freeze!" he exclaimed, with a weird chuckle that was akin to a sob of

despair, and started him off coughing once more. "And me worth millions—three millions at least in solid gold—all my own, and honest come by, stowed away within ten mile of where I must die wanting a crust of bread."

The hours sped by, the embers died away, and a merciful insensibility swooped down upon the self-styled millionaire.

In the morning—if that could be called morning when the belated sun struggled over the distant bluff—two men, one of them white, the other an elderly Indian, came up from the river through the belt of pines and saw the shelter simultaneously. The Indian, after the manner of his race, was tall, gaunt, and solemn of countenance; the white man was short and slight, with features which might once have been refined, but which had suffered by stress of weather and reckless living. He was quite young, and walked with a jaunty, quick step, which made the Indian, for all his stately stride, grunt in his efforts to keep pace.

With characteristic caution the Indian came to a halt, and unslung his Winchester

rifle. "Ugh! a lodge of the pale-faces," he ejaculated.

"Well, what of that, you bloodthirsty old ruffian? You ain't on the war-path, are you?" replied his companion. "Besides, it's long odds against anyone being there. The few miners that have been about the headwaters of the Yukon this season must have skedaddled for Circle City before now. When we passed up a week ago we met most of them going down stream, you know."

With some show of reluctance the Indian reslung his rifle and followed the Englishman, who had hardly slackened his steps. "Blue Lightning not on the war-path, but best be ready," the red man replied. "Plenty bad men among miner people."

The other indulged in a monkeyish grin. "We are not exactly saints ourselves, if it comes to that," he retorted. "You ought to be a Balliol don, Blue Lightning, with all your power of casuistry. Just stay here, will you, while I go on and see if there is anybody in the hut?"

The Indian, to whom the last sentence was

alone intelligible, grunted gravely, and again halted in his tracks. The little Englishman, picking his way over the snow-covered moss, walked up to the shelter and looked in. Then he disappeared into the interior, only to put his head out again almost immediately.

"Come here, Blue Lightning," he called; "the gentleman is at home, after all."

A moment later these queer companions stood over the unconscious occupant of the hut—the red man silent and unemotional, the white man restless and excited. The last spark had died out of the embers, though there was just enough warmth left in the ashes to have prevented death from frost. A faint movement of the shoulders showed that the prostrate figure still breathed.

"It is the White Ghost, is it not?" asked the Englishman, who had been using much pantomimic gesture to arouse a corresponding excitement in the Indian.

"Yes, he the White Ghost," was the indifferent reply.

"Come outside and pow-wow then," said the other. "This may pan out the best stroke

of luck we've hit on for many a day—better than salmon and peltries. Stay, though, I'll give him a dose of the merry fire-water first. Circle City rum would make a corpse sit up."

Producing a flask from the pocket of his hunting-shirt, he poured some liquid between the sick man's lips, and without waiting to note the result, followed the Indian, who had preceded him into the open.

"Now, Blue Lightning," he said, when they had gone beyond earshot, "you know more about this chap than I do. The talk among the gold prospectors is that he has struck it rich—made a big pile, in fact!"

It is probable that the Indian did not understand his white friend's colloquialisms word for word, but he had enough English to gather their general meaning. He had lighted a red-earth pipe, and was smoking stoically as he leaned against a pine-stem. He smoked on in silence for over a minute before he answered:

"The gold-hunters make a heap of lies. When they no make lie about their own

findings, they make lie about other men. They talk that the White Ghost has found plenty gold in secret place. The Great Manitou alone knows if it is true."

"Your people call him the White Ghost because he is so thin and ill, eh?"

"He is very sick and very quiet; he comes and goes like the wind among the forest trees—no one see how; he keep away from camps of other miners, all to himself. Not bad man, but no friends with anyone—pale-face or Indian. So call him Ghost," replied Blue Lightning sententiously.

"I see," said the Englishman, tracing figures on the frozen snow with his boot and speaking rather to himself than to his companion. "It all points to this spectral Johnny having struck gold rich, and the chances are that, not being able to carry it all down to the Settlements, he remained in the district after the other miners cleared out in order to hide it away. Doubtless he would return in the spring with means of transport. He must have injured his foot in trying to launch that canoe which we found broken in

the rapids, and probably he lost his food supplies at the same time. Luck hasn't come my way since I was sent down from Oxford, but it seems to be going to smile at last. Blue Lightning, old cock, I really think that this is a case for a bargain."

"Bargain always good," asserted the Indian, with his thoughts on trade rum and blankets. "Paleface got fire-water? He swop him for our moose-meat and dried corn?"

"Bah! not that sort of bargain," exclaimed the Englishman testily. He had hoped that Blue Lightning would understand without a detailed explanation, for it irked him to have to indicate what his conscience told him was not a very pretty conception. But the sacrifice to his feelings had to be made.

"This is what I mean," he went on after a brief hesitation. "The poor wretch has probably got gold piled up in some *cachet* hereabouts. On the other hand, we have got food and the means of taking him down the river to the Settlements. He seems in poor health—apart from the injury to his foot—and the odds are that he will die on our

hands, or, at any rate, before he can return in the spring to fetch and enjoy his pile. Where's the harm if we put it to him this way:—If he'll tell us where the gold is *cache'd*, we'll tote him along to Circle City; if he don't see his way to that, we've got no grub to spare, and no room on the raft?"

Blue Lightning's "Ugh!" was non-committal and exasperating.

"Confound you, why can't you say what you think of the plan?" cried the Englishman.

"What would Star Eyes think?" returned the Indian.

"I was under the impression, derived from a juvenile course of Fenimore Cooper, that you alleged warriors didn't worry much about what squaws thought," said the maker of the proposal. But for some reason Blue Lightning's question had checked his exuberance. The corners of his nervous, facile mouth drooped, and the element of doubt seemed to have entered into his scheme. The Indian did nothing to help him out, but a close observer might have noticed that the red man's bloodshot eyeballs were drawn side-

ways a little, towards a pine tree in the rear.

"If Star Eyes is a sensible young woman," proceeded the Englishman after a pause, "she ought to cotton to the idea quicker than either of us. It is chiefly on her account that I want to make money quick. I am very sweet upon your daughter, Blue Lightning, as you know; and I like the vagabond life I have led since I cast in my lot with you. But it cannot go on for ever. Though you have your disadvantages as a father-in-law, I want to marry Star Eyes, paleface fashion, and take her to the Settlements—to England, perhaps, some day. I cannot do that as the penniless loafer I am now, and this miner's gold would just make matters easy. But there! you solemn old aboriginal, I'm talking over your head," the young man broke off with a whimsical laugh. "Let's put it plain. See here—get plenty gold, me marry Star Eyes, plenty heap of fire-water for Blue Lightning. That ought to fetch you. Besides, Star Eyes need not be told."

"No, Star Eyes need not be told! She has

heard every bad, base word you have spoken," said a sweet, musical voice close at hand; and, wheeling round, the Englishman found himself confronted by an Indian maiden proudly defiant. She was clad from head to foot in silver-fox fur, fitting her tightly and showing the exquisite proportions of her form. Her skin was of a rich ruddy brown, with a bloom on it—no darker than is found in many a city of Southern Europe. Her blue-black eyes, ablaze now with anger, looked capable of melting to tenderness.

A lurking smile flitted over Blue Lightning's saturnine features as he smoked on, watching the young man's discomfiture. That he *was* discomfited by the beautiful apparition, there was no room for doubt. The air of impertinent superiority which he affected towards the girl's father vanished as by magic in the presence of the girl herself. His perkiness subsided into a quaint mixture of the lover-like and the deferential, which to an onlooker would have seemed, at first sight, wildly incongruous when held towards an Indian squaw within a few degrees of the Arctic Circle.

Nevertheless, Star Eyes, who had been educated by the good Fathers of the Red River Mission, was worthy of respect from better men than Fenton Gartside, wastrel and wanderer.

"You got tired of waiting, and followed us? I—I hope you haven't made your feet wet in the snow," was all he could stammer.

Star Eyes laughed a clear ringing laugh of scorn. "An Indian maiden is not afraid of two inches of snow," she said. "Yes, I followed, thinking that you must have found the owners of the wrecked canoe, as you were so long gone from the raft. And glad I am that I came. Let us go and help this poor man whom you would have robbed."

She led the way to the hut, Gartside following shamefacedly with Blue Lightning, who, holding his civilised daughter in deepest awe, was probably congratulating himself that he had seen her before consenting to the scheme. They found the sick man still unconscious, though his pulse beat stronger and his breathing was more regular, from the effect of the stimulant that Gartside had administered.

Star Eyes cast a rapid glance round. Except that which the man carried on his person and a tin cooking-pan, there was nothing belonging to him to make their task more arduous. Bidding her two companions raise him gently and carry him down to the river, she brought up the rear of the procession so that she might see that her commands were faithfully obeyed. Thus they came, without further word, through the pines to where a curious craft—a raft of logs with a thatched superstructure—was moored in a little backwater of the mighty stream. The wooden deck-house was divided into several compartments, and in one of these, where a brazier of fire burned, the invalid was placed upon a pile of skins.

"Now you can go to your business," said Star Eyes. "I will tend the sick man and try to save his life." And she waved them imperiously away.

The "business" of Blue Lightning and Gartside was to unmoor the raft and pole it out from its quiet harbour on to the broad bosom of the Yukon. The old Indian was a

past master in the art of river pilotage, and Gartside, who had begun to recover the nerve lost in frontier saloons, was proving an apt pupil. Once out in the current the queer craft went swirling on its crazy course down stream, seemingly tossed like a cork at the pleasure of the rushing torrent, but in reality guided with unfaltering skill by the poles which its two navigators plied from its unguarded sides. Down the boiling rapids and over mud banks, between fangs of threatening rock and under drooping pine-boughs, often narrowly escaping the drift ice which told of coming winter, sometimes in mid-stream and now hugging the bank, the raft sped on till the few hours of daylight were spent and Blue Lightning steered into an inlet for the night.

When they had made fast, the Indian drew his blanket round him, and, squatting on his hams, began to smoke; but Gartside went to the entry of the thatched erection and looked in. The place was in darkness, save for a ray that came from the fish-oil lamp in the partition where the sick man lay.

"Is he better, Star Eyes?" Gartside called softly.

The girl came from behind the screen, her finger to her lips. "He will live for the present, but not for long, I think," she said. "He regained his senses, and after I had fed him he fell asleep."

"Did he say anything about himself?"

At the question Star Eyes justified her name with a scintillating flash. "I can't trust you Mr. Gartside, after what I overheard this morning," she said; "and I have warned him not to trust you either. If you will mind him for a little while, I will get supper for you and for my father."

The Englishman sulkily assented, and passed behind the partition, while the girl began to busy herself with strips of smoked salmon and dried deer-meat in the outer half of the rude log-cabin. The patient was lying on the pile of skins in a sound sleep, and there was a tinge of colour on his haggard face, which was an eloquent tribute to the care of his nurse.

Gartside leaned against the side of the

cabin in a careless attitude, looking down at his proposed victim of the morning. He was listening intently to the culinary preparations beyond the screen, for throughout the toilsome labours of poling the raft an idea had been working in his mind, and the chance to test it had come—if Star Eyes attended properly to her cooking.

Presently with a sudden motion he stooped down and ran his hand over the sleeping man's clothes. The outline of a revolver revealed itself to his fumbling fingers; then came a sheath-knife and some loose cartridges. None of these were withdrawn; but the next obstruction, which was of greater bulk, bulging one of the side pockets of the rusty velveteen coat, met with different treatment. Deftly and gingerly Gartside extracted it from the pocket without disturbing the sleeper, and untied the string of the coarse canvas bag that rewarded his efforts. The contents proved to be gold dust and small nuggets to the value of about £500.

"I thought so, as we carried him; it was too heavy to be anything but gold. Well, I

have not quite sunk to larceny from the person—as yet,” Gartside muttered, as he re-tied the string, and with equal deftness restored the bag to the pocket. But his object was not yet accomplished; rather did the sight of the gold add zest to his search, as though confirming some theory that led to a larger issue than the miner’s provision for current expenses.

The busy fingers got to work again, diving now into the breast-pocket of the sick man’s coat, and emerging almost immediately with an oblong slip of leather, which it appeared was only a wrap, covering an enclosure. The fingers trembled nervously now, for according to Gartside’s theory he was “getting warm,” as children say. But when his shaking hand had removed the leather envelope his expressive face showed keenest disappointment.

“Bah! It is only a photograph,” he exclaimed under his breath, as he withdrew a “cabinet”-sized picture mounted on card. “All my trouble for nothing, after all!”

He was dejectedly replacing the photograph in its well-worn case, when a flicker of

he feeble lamplight fell athwart it, and, his eyes being arrested, he stooped to examine what he had thought, in the failure of his object, could have no interest for him.

"Well, I'll be shot if this isn't funny!" he muttered, scanning the face in the picture in blank amazement. "Blessed if it isn't Dick Osborne—good old Dick, my Balliol chum, who saved my life in Sandford Lasher! How in the name of mystery can his jolly old phiz have got into the keeping of an American miner at the back of nowhere? Come to think of it, though, the chap doesn't look like a Yank. That velveteen coat is distinctly British. The nuisance is that I can't ask him what he knows of Dick without giving myself away."

But "Dick" was soon to be driven from that erratic brain by a larger discovery. Once more Gartside had begun to replace the picture, when the thought struck him to see where it had been taken, and he turned it over to look at the back. The effect upon him of what he saw there was infinitely more convulsing than the photograph had been.

Only by strenuous effort did he keep himself from shouting aloud in triumph as his eyes fell upon the tracery of lines, with figures and words interspersed, that was drawn on the back of the card-mount.

"I knew it!" were the words shaped on his quivering lips after a close study of the card. "I knew that if the beggar had made a *cachet* he would have a plan of the place, and here it is—as simple as A B C. I must shove this back in his pocket; but I have got it fixed on a fairly retentive brain, and I will draw a copy of it within the hour that should make the excellent Fenton Gartside master of the situation."

Swiftly he stooped to restore the packet to the breast of the sleeper; and, having done so, rose—none too soon. At that moment Star Eyes came round the screen, and stood regarding him with intently searching gaze. Gartside's heart beat like a drum, but the girl's words, informing him that the evening meal was ready, reassured him, and he went to join the old Indian in the smoky obscurity of the outer cabin.

So on the morrow, and for many days during the fast shortening hours of light, the queer craft swept onwards towards the white man's outpost in the desolate north land. And not one of her strangely-assorted passengers guessed that her stout logs carried the first spark of a train more deadly than ever fired a mine of gunpowder.

CHAPTER II.

VENDETTA BY GOLD.

"If you only knew how I was situated, Dick, you wouldn't think it quite fair to me—even to Beryl herself—to press this matter now."

The speaker, Horace Asquith of Glastonford Hall, Hampshire, passed a thin hand over his pale, high-bred brow, and avoided the anxious eyes of the stalwart young fellow in Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers who sat confronting him. To make the avoidance seem more natural, the elder man rose from his chair and stood looking out of the open French window across the ill-cared-for lawn towards the lush-green cornfields.

Mr. Asquith sighed wearily at the thought that, promising as were the crops, they could

bring but scant relief to a gentleman whose library table groaned under such a weight of unsettled accounts and solicitors' reminders as did the handsome piece of furniture behind him. And then the sight of those mortgaged acres gave him fresh inspiration for emphasising his objection; and, turning, he made a painful effort to look the vicar's son in the face. That face, though troubled, was still so frankly sympathetic that Mr. Asquith went on with greater confidence.

"Believe me," he said, "I am grieved to have to raise an obstacle. Since you were children I have always looked upon you and Beryl as meant for one another. I would trust the dear girl to no one more cheerfully, but—yes, there is an obstacle. I do not well see how I can sanction an engagement now."

"Would you mind telling me what the obstacle is, Mr. Asquith?" rejoined Dick Osborne quietly. "I believe that I can guess it, but I would prefer to have it from your own lips. Even if you cannot treat me as a future son-in-law you may safely treat me as

a friend. You think that I am not rich enough, eh, sir?"

"Well—er—yes," said Mr. Asquith, hopelessly breaking down in an attempt to meet Dick's eye. "It is galling to have to take moncy into consideration where the affections are concerned, but—er—I am afraid that that is the reason, my dear boy."

Dick's honest face showed that he was hurt rather than angry. Indeed, despite the blow to his fondest hopes, he could not find it in his heart to be wroth with the kindly but weak old man who had been his father's friend for thirty years, and who had treated him almost as a son from boyhood.

"I have no right to complain, sir," he replied. "I have often wondered that you allowed a penniless parson's son to run wild with the daughter of the Hall; but I wish that you could have given me a hint of this sooner. We have grown fond of each other, so far as I am concerned, almost with the certainty that we should have your sanction. And, after all, I am not doing so badly. I inherited a hundred a year from my poor

mother, and I earned two hundred myself last year at the Bar. This year, if briefs come in as at present, I ought to double that amount."

Mr. Asquith fidgeted uneasily, and feebly cleared his throat.

"I am sure I am very glad you are doing so well," he said, "but—but, perhaps I had better be quite frank. I am under the unfortunate, I may say the terrible, necessity of needing a son-in-law of real wealth, who will have—er—resources beyond a mere income sufficient to keep himself and a wife. The fact is, my dear boy, I am in Queer Street—right up at the far end of Queer Street. My farms are nearly all unlet, and every one of them is mortgaged. If I cannot pay off the principal mortgage by next March—just ten months from now—the mortgagee will foreclose, and the name of Asquith will be known no more at Glastonford Hall. It seems a horribly mercenary thing to say, but if you were in a position to pay out the mortgagee you might have Beryl tomorrow."

Dick paled beneath his healthy sun-tan, and his voice shook a little.

"I can read between the lines of what you tell me," he replied bitterly. "Rumours that you were not so well off as formerly have reached me; but I never dreamed, Mr. Asquith, that you would endeavour to reinstate your fortunes by hawking your daughter about for the highest bidder."

"Really this is—but there, I must make allowances for disappointment," Mr. Asquith protested. "To my mind, any sacrifice is justifiable to save the break-up of an old family associated with the soil for centuries. Besides, you wrong me when you charge me with hawking my daughter for bidders. A suitor has appeared on the scene—without any engineering on my part, I assure you. I have to give him my answer to-night—not a final answer, you know, for Beryl alone can give him that; but a provisional consent, and—er—the promise of my good offices."

Dick Osborne swung his long limbs out of the low chair in which he had been sitting, and took his hat.

"Then I will bid you good-day and good-bye," he said in a strained, unnatural voice. "I have an invitation to the Abbey myself for to-night, and I know that you and Beryl are going. If *that* is where this bargain is to be ratified; if Rupert Malahide is the purchaser to whom you would sell my Beryl—well"—his tone softened and his manner changed—"I was going to say that I wouldn't know a man who would do such a thing, and to bounce out of the room in a rage. But I won't do that, Mr. Asquith, because I've known you such a long time, and from my heart I pity you. Your plan ~~wild~~ never come off; your daughter is quite capable of sacrificing herself to save *you*—not the family acres—but hardly by marrying such a brute as Malahide."

Whatever Horace Asquith's rejoinder might have been, it was prevented by the opening of the library door and the entrance of as fair a specimen of English girlhood as the eye could wish to dwell upon. A sweet, winning face, an exquisite figure, and a complexion that was eloquent of sound health and plenty of beauty.

sleep had won for Beryl Asquith an unvalued reputation as "The Belle of the County." Had she lived in less degenerate times, when men were not ashamed to voice their admiration for feminine loveliness, she would have been the "reigning toast" of the countryside; as it was, though she had admirers by the score, she had never yet had an acknowledged lover—chiefly because of the well-founded impression that a very good "understanding" existed between her and her old playfellow Dick Osborne. The honest young Hampshire squires, with an hereditary distaste for poaching in any form, chivalrously abstained from pursuing a girl who was deemed "as good as engaged" to the popular son of the popular old vicar.

"What has the Ogre been doing to annoy you now, Dick?" she asked, so carelessly that it was evident that she had heard only the last three words. "You might at least cease to abuse him on a day when you are to be his guest. Come out into the garden, if papa can spare you; I have got a piece of news."

Stooping to kiss her father, she passed out

of the French window on to the lawn; and Dick followed, nothing loth to terminate an interview which he foresaw could have no satisfactory results. But on the threshold he paused, and re-entered the room for a moment.

"She has not been told your—your high aims for her, Mr. Asquith?" he whispered, with a bitterness which he strove vainly to suppress.

"No; and I beg that you will not enlighten her; something may happen—Heaven grant it may!—to prevent the necessity even yet," replied the elder man, into whose weak blue eyes his unwitting daughter's caress had brought the ready tears.

"I should not dream of sullyng her ears with such a proposition. I am glad she does not know," said Dick.

"It is curious that you should have been talking of Mr. Malahide when I came in," Beryl said, as he rejoined her, and they fell to pacing side by side. "I have just met an old friend of yours in the village, the news of whose return will give the magnate at the

Abbey a bad quarter of an hour, I should imagine."

"You don't mean Ned Shrimpton, who was gamekeeper at the Abbey before Malahide bought it?" cried Dick eagerly.

"Ned Shrimpton—no more, no less," said Beryl. "Tell me, Dick, was there any truth in that rumour that he gave the Ogre a thrashing before he disappeared so suddenly three years ago?"

Dick laughed grimly. Coming on the top of what he had just heard, the reminiscence was one of infinite gusto. Well he remembered how the fine young fellow, who taught him all he knew of field-craft, had come to him fresh from the beating which he had administered to the rich parvenu; how he had described the merited sufferings of the new master of the Abbey, and had expressed his intention of going to seek his fortune in "foreign parts."

"There was every truth in it," replied Dick. "Ned's father and mother had a little farm, you know, and Malahide, who wanted the place for a shooting lodge, sold them up, and

turned them out after they had had a bad year, and had got behind with their rent. Ned, having been himself discharged, could not help them, and they died on the same day, of broken hearts, probably, in the workhouse. The next day Ned waylaid Malahide and gave him a sound drubbing, though our great man, in his brand-new dignity, thought fit to say very little about it. But tell me of Ned. How has he been doing?"

"He didn't tell me, and he looked so thin and woe-begone that I hardly liked to inquire," Beryl replied. "It is rather singular, though, that he asked exactly the same question about you—whether you were making much money at your 'trade,' as he calls the Bar. When I said that you were still plodding towards the fortune which was your just due, but that it was not yet in sight, he startled me by breaking into a strange laugh. I was surprised that he should seem pleased at your lack of success, because otherwise he was so nice and warm-hearted about you. But his whole manner was strange, and I fear that he is very, very ill. He asked to be 'respectfully

remembered' to you—whatever that may mean—and said that he intended to see you to-night or to-morrow morning."

"Poor chap! his hardships and wanderings must have been too much for him; with all his giant frame he was always weak on the chest," said Dick. "Did he tell you what part of the world he had been in?"

"Yes; he said he had been in America, near some river called the Yukon, I think it was, in the North West Territories—wherever that may be," replied Beryl vaguely. "I understood, though, that he had been lying ill at Montreal for six months before he was well enough to undertake the voyage home."

"I have only the haziest notion myself where the Yukon is," said Dick, laughing at her assumption of ignorance. "The North West Territories I think I could find on the map as well as you could if you really tried, dear. But here comes Aunt Rebecca. She is sure to be able to enlighten us; the chances are that she has navigated the Yukon from its source to the sea, and all its tributaries as well."

It was a queer little figure, not at all suggesting the exploration of distant rivers, that suddenly appeared from a by-path to give rise to his remark. Mr. Asquith's only sister, known not only in the family, but to a wide circle of friends as "Aunt Rebecca," was a tiny old lady of such shrivelled and shrunken form that strangers generally thought her on the point of death from some wasting disease. It was only when her quick nervous walk, her vigorous speech, and above all her weather-beaten, parchment-like complexion, were noted, that the illusion was dispelled, and Aunt Rebecca was seen to be a very "good life" indeed, despite her sixty years.

Her hobby, amounting almost to a mania, was for foreign travel. Having an independent income, she was able to indulge it to the full bent of her intrepid old soul, and there were few accessible places on the face of the globe that she had not visited in the course of forty years of perpetual wandering. Just back from a mere insignificant trip to Damascus, she was "cooling off," as she called it, before starting on a long-projected excursion to Samoa. She

wore a funny little black cape and a mushroom-shaped hat, tied under her chin with ribbon, but with all her eccentricity and quaint attire she had a self-reliant dignity that had commanded for her respect in many an uncouth corner of the earth. For the rest, while professing to hate the male sex generally and to scorn all love-making, she adored Dick Osborne, and cherished the secret hope that he and her favourite niece would be made happy.

"When were you last on the Yukon river, Aunt Rebecca, and what particular form of sport prevails in that region?" asked Dick, as the old lady approached, stabbing the turf with her ebony cane.

She shot a keen glance at him from under her iron-grey brows. "Is this impertinence, young man, or have you a reason for asking?" she said brusquely.

"A very good reason," Dick replied. "I have just heard that a humble friend of mine has returned from there, and I want to know what he is likely to have been up to in those parts."

"I have never been nearer to the Yukon than Vancouver," said Aunt Rebecca, frowning terribly. "I know less than nothing of what a white man could do there unless he peddled poisonous spirits to the Indians. Some idiots have been looking for gold there recently, I believe, but I never heard that they found any worth mentioning." And Aunt Rebecca turned and stumped back into the shrubbery, for it irritated her to have to own that there was a country under the sun with which she was not familiar.

The young people smiled, knowing her weakness, and soon afterwards separated to go and dress for the dinner-party to which they had both been invited. As Dick walked across the fields to the Vicarage he debated with himself whether he would not send an excuse and go into the village to hunt up Ned Shrimpton. He had only accepted the invitation in the first instance to please his father, who was unable to go himself, and had a clergyman's dread of offending a wealthy parishioner. And now he felt that it would tax his powers of dissembling to the utmost

to be civil to the host whom he had so recently heard was also to be a rival for his sweetheart's hand.

But on reflection he concluded that he could afford to treat Malahide's pretensions with contempt—no matter what pressure poor harassed Mr. Asquith might put upon his daughter—and he decided to fulfil the engagement, distasteful as it would be to him. So secure did he feel in Beryl's love that he was confident that, not even to save her father from ruin, would she consent to give herself to anyone but himself—least of all to the man whom in her intense dislike she had dubbed "the Ogre." At the same time, though she would draw the line at so great a sacrifice, he knew that her sense of duty would prevent her from marrying him without her father's sanction, and he was downhearted in consequence.

"Poor old Asquith!" he thought, as he turned into the Vicarage gates. "If reports are true, Malahide has other relations with him than those of a suitor for Beryl's hand. Doubtless he would be glad enough to get

her for her own sake, but I shrewdly suspect that *he* is the mortgagee, and that he is holding out this threat of foreclosure for a double purpose. He has got his grip on the estate anyhow, unless Asquith can pay him off; but if he married Beryl, the only child and heiress, they would come to him automatically on the old man's death without his incurring the odium of selling up an ancient county family."

Whether or no Dick's surmise was correct, there was certainly nothing in the outward appearance of Mr. Rupert Malahide to justify the nickname bestowed upon him by Miss Asquith. An hour later, sitting at the head of his table in the splendid oak dining-room at the Abbey, and playing the host with polished ease to the small party assembled, he would have been taken by any but a very keen observer as quite to the manner born. Perhaps there was a shade too much self-assertion in his demeanour—not more, some would have thought, than was admissible in a man of culture who had evidently seen much of the world. In age about forty, well-built

and physically handsome, with a sallow, dark complexion that suggested a touch of Southern or Jewish blood, he had one peculiarity that would have singled him out anywhere—a long livid scar, running at an acute angle from his left temple across his forehead.

This scar had been Rupert Malahide's social undoing since he had bought the fine old place that owned him as master. Other things had added to his unpopularity—such as his changing the historic name of Glastonford to Malahide Abbey, and sundry sharp dealings in the matter of land-grabbing and oppression of tenants—but, as the Lord-Lieutenant of the County had said, that scar made him “impossible.” Rumour had it that a great West-End usurer, who had retired and gone no one knew whither, possessed just such a mark as a *souvenir* from a ruined victim who had shot himself after inflicting it. The identity of Rupert Malahide with the money-lender of St. James's Street had never been established, but the whisper got abroad, and sufficed. None but his immediate neighbours, and not all of them, would

have anything to do with the purchaser of the Abbey.

To-night, for instance, the splendour of the entertainment accentuated and brought into relief the paucity of the guests. Mr. Asquith and Beryl, with Dick Osborne and a Captain and Mrs. Armstrong—the latter a skittish couple, who would go anywhere for a good dinner—made the sum total of a party which it took four footmen and a butler to wait upon, and a hundred pounds to feed.

The function was not altogether a social success, as was to be expected when most of the guests were there because they could find no good reason for being anywhere else. Mr. Asquith was nervous and ill at ease; Beryl looked charming, but was unnaturally cold and stately; and Dick was so silent and reserved, that Malahide shot a furtive glance at him now and again, a glance which was followed by a dilatation of the ever-smiling eyes. Notwithstanding the host's gaiety, and the chatter of empty-headed Mrs. Armstrong, conversation dragged towards the close of the meal, and

everyone was glad when the two ladies made a move.

After their departure, when the wine had circulated once or twice, Rupert Malahide pushed his chair back and rose from the table.

"I have a little business to settle with Mr. Asquith," he said. "You two fellows will excuse us for a few minutes, I know. Don't forget to pass the decanter, Armstrong; Osborne seems a trifle hipped to-night, and that '47 port is the very thing for him. Now, Mr. Asquith, if you will come into my private den we will soon get our talk over."

Mr. Asquith rose dejectedly, and, casting a piteous look at Dick, was following Malahide from the room, when there came the sound of a heavy scrunching fall from outside one of the long windows, succeeded by a deep groan of anguish. The dining-room was on the ground floor, and it was evident that someone was in trouble on the broad gravel-walk that skirted the mansion. Dick and Captain Armstrong sprang to their feet, and Malahide, hurrying with an exclamation of

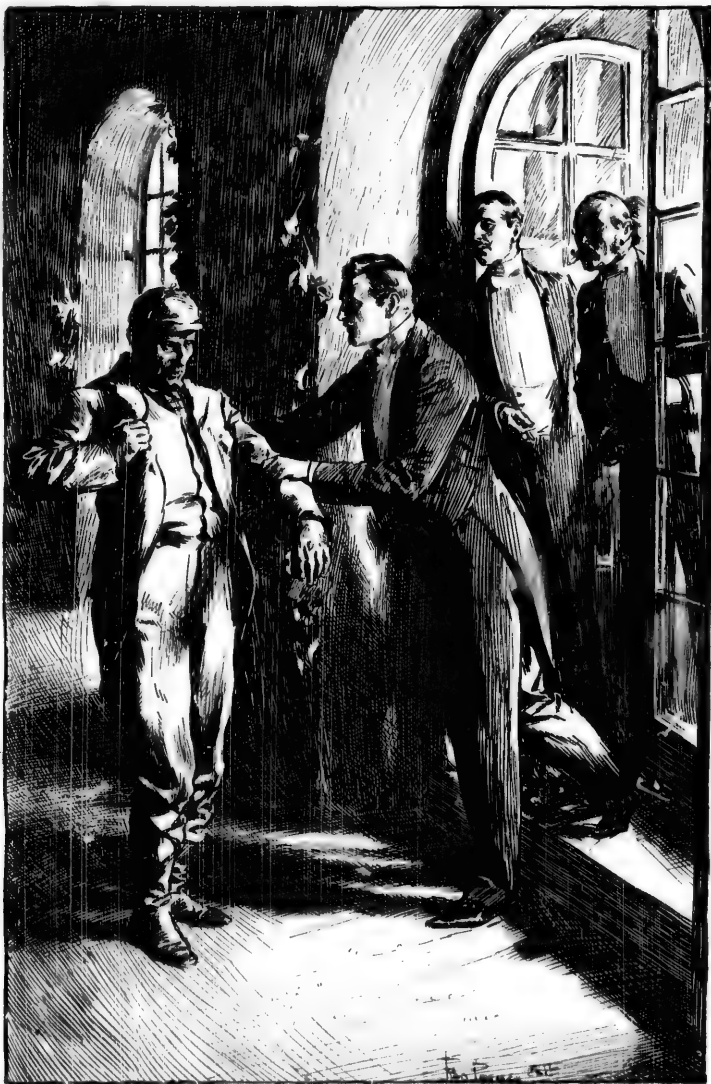
angry surprise to the window, threw it open, disclosing in the flood of electric light that streamed forth the prostrate figure of a man. As they reached him he struggled to his feet.

"Why, it's Ned Shrimpton," cried Dick, springing forward to lend him a helping hand, "I heard you were back, Ned. You are very ill, I fear?"

"There's not so much as a kick left in me, Master Dick," said the ex-gamekeeper, panting for breath. "I'm not many days for this world. But I have something to say to you, sir—and to you, too," glaring with fierce eyes at Malahide. "So, hearing as you were here, I made bold to come up to-night, for I reckon I haven't got much time to spare. I thought I might as well kill two birds—a white and a black 'un, ha, ha!—with right and left barrels, d'ye see?"

"The man must be mad! He used me like a brute, but I bear no malice," whispered Malahide rather nervously. "We had better have him in. The servants will come, and there will be a scene if we stay out here."

And motioning the others back into the



"'WHY, IT'S NED SHRIMPTON,' CRIED DICK" (p. 42).

room, he waited till Dick had assisted Shrimpton through the window, quickly closed it, and pulled down the blind. Then he went to the table and poured out a glass of wine.

"Here, my man, drink this; it will do you good," he said. "I am willing to let bygones be bygones if you are."

But as he approached the chair in which Dick had placed Ned Shrimpton, the latter waved him back, his wild eyes burning with sullen anger.

"I would not take bite or sup under your accursed roof for fifty thousand sovereigns!" he hissed. "Fifty thousand sovereigns! What am I talking of?" he went on with a rasping laugh. "Who am I to let on that I am in need of such a trifle as that! That reminds me of what I came here to tell you, Rupert Malahide. Look at me first—the man whose parents you drove to die as paupers. That is well! Now listen to this. For every million you own, I can plank down *three*, and I know where to lay my hand on more, if I want it."

"You had better drink some wine, and

calm yourself," said Malahide, whose natural instincts had braced him to sudden caution at the sound of so much wealth, though he was inclined to think the tale only a frenzied dream.

"You believe I am mad, but I will prove it by facts and figures," returned Shrimpton hoarsely. "You, Rupert Malahide, shall hear the facts; a better man shall have the figures. I was in British Columbia, and from there made my way into the wild North-West, where there was talk of gold near the river Yukon. The Yukon is more than two thousand miles long, so I shan't give away my secret by telling you that much. I worked alone, avoiding all white men; and it was an easy job, there not being a score in the district.

"Well, I found gold—found it in such quantity that, single-handed and in bad health, I could not carry it away. That was last summer, and I waited till there were no prying eyes about, and then I hid my treasure where no one could find it, till I came back or sent someone whom I could trust—

not you, Rupert Malahide ; don't go for to think that."

The rasping laugh checked him for a minute, and then he went on. All his hearers, including poor worried Mr. Asquith, were listening now. The ring of truth had asserted itself in the detail of his story.

"I waited a bit too long to make my *cachet*, and met with an accident that left me without food or means of escape. I was on the point of death, all alone in the freezing desert, when I was found by a white man and two Indians, who behaved like Christians and brought me safe to the Settlements. But I knew I was a doomed man, and should never stand a trip to the Yukon country to fetch my gold, so I made for the old country to let the only man I cared a cent for reap the benefit of my find. I should have been home six months ago, but that I lay sick at Montreal."

He paused and gasped for breath, grinning maliciously all the time at Malahide.

"I've heard a thing or two in the village," he continued, "and I am glad to be able to make matters right for you and the young

lady, Master Dick. I was a gamekeeper once, and it's a real pleasure to stall off a poacher. Bend your head a moment."

Dick stooped down and Shrimpton whispered rapidly for over a minute in his ear.

"That's where the gold is—three millions of it," he concluded, aloud. "If so be as I havn't made it plain, this will help you to find the place—on the back of your own photo, as I've carried with me this three year." And plunging his hand into his pocket, he gave Dick a thin package of well-worn leather. When he had done so his hand fell feebly to his side; but the next moment, to the astonishment of everyone, he rose slowly to his feet and spoke in a clear voice:—

"I have neither chick nor child, nor any living relative. The gold is yours, Mr. Osborne, for the trouble of fetching it. This is April; if you start at once you will be able to get in and out again before winter settles down. That is all my business, gentlemen; if you will kindly open the window I will be going. I—I cannot——"

He broke off suddenly, a great gush of

blood surging from the overwrought lungs. Then he took a step forward, clutching at his chest like a wounded animal, staggered, and fell dead, while Malahide, pale, but self-controlled, was still fingering the hasp of the window.

The death of a returned gamekeeper from undoubted natural causes could not be expected to disturb more than momentarily the smooth machinery of a millionaire's household. Half an hour later, Rupert Malahide stood in his magnificent entrance hall to speed the parting guests, the ladies being ignorant that anything unusual had occurred.

The Armstrongs drove away, and Malahide handed Beryl to the carriage, holding the door courteously for Mr. Asquith to follow. He had to wait a little, for the old squire was exchanging an animated but subdued conversation with Dick, who was going to walk home.

"We were interrupted to-night, but I hope to have that chat with you at the first opportunity," said the master of the Abbey as the master of the Hall at length took his seat.

Mr. Asquith looked flushed and excited, but with the instinct of a gentleman he tried not to be rude to his host.

"I do not—er—exactly think that it will lead to anything—now," he stammered.

"I quite understand," said Malahide, infusing a tinge of sadness into his voice. "Good-night to you; good-night, Miss Asquith." And the shabby Hall brougham drove off, leaving him face to face with Dick Osborne. For over half a minute the two men eyed each other steadily, as though curbing an impulse to say something that might be injudicious. Dick was the first to break silence with the homely commonplace:

"Thanks for your hospitality. Good-night!"

"So glad you have enjoyed yourself," Malahide replied, with the suspicion of a sneer. "Good-night to you, and take care of the barbed-wire fences on your way."

With which significant advice he went slowly back into the house, and sought the seclusion of his study.

"Barbed fences!" he kept muttering to

himself. "Barbed fences are very useful things! I think that Jake Mursell is as good a specimen of the human barbed fence as I know."

And, sitting down to his writing-table, he drafted the following telegram for despatch as soon as the office should open in the morning:

"MURSELL, Clifford's Inn, Fleet Street.

"Be prepared to start for America forthwith on urgent private business. Instructions at interview. Expect me at noon."

CHAPTER III.

A DANGEROUS EMISSARY.

UP one of the dingy staircases in dingy Clifford's Inn the legend, "Mursell and Boggs, Law-writers and Copyists," painted in black letters on the dirty wall, was followed by the caricature of a podgy hand with the dexter finger pointing to an adjacent door. Mounting the stairs at noon on the day after the events last related, Mr. Rupert Malahide made straight for that door with a disregard of the directing digit that suggested a certain familiarity with the premises of Messrs. Mursell and Boggs.

Having tried the door and found it locked, Malahide applied his knuckles to the centre panel in a peculiar rataplan that must have required learning. No voice responded, and

for over a minute his summons had no effect. Nor, for the matter of that, did the visitor seem to expect any. He just cooled his heels and waited without the least sign of impatience till—"Click!" went some primitive piece of mechanism on the inside, and the door swung open, closing again with a sharp metallic snap directly he had entered.

The room in which he found himself was an outer one, very small, and with a counter running its whole length. No one was visible, and the door at the back of the counter leading into an inner room was closed. In no way disconcerted, Malahide knocked on the counter, making a different tune this time, and with more immediate result. A man opened the inner door, and recognising his visitor came out and raised the flap of the counter. Then without a word the two passed together into the room beyond, and not till the door was carefully closed did either of them speak.

"Your precautions are rather a nuisance, Jake; but I suppose that they are as

necessary as ever," Malahide said, seating himself on a rickety cane chair, which, with the exception of a table and another chair, formed the sole furniture of the apartment.

"As necessary as ever," repeated the representative of Mursell and Boggs. "I have been doing some very fine work lately. Would you care to look at it?"

"No, thanks; I have no time to admire forged bank-notes to-day," replied Malahide. "You got my wire? You are ready to start for America at once?"

"Needs must—you know the proverb, I reckon, Mr.—ah!—Malahide, isn't it *now*?" returned the owner of the shabby room with a vagueness as to the name which would have interested some of his visitor's neighbours in Hampshire. He was a curious-looking man—this "law-writer," who had to be so careful about chance callers, and who allowed brusque insinuations about forged bank-notes to pass without demur. Of any age between five-and-twenty and forty; short and stout; bull-necked and clean-shaven; with

an insinuating, confidential manner, and jovial eyes that either laughed at or with his hearers—no one could ever be quite sure which—he might have been anything from a successful counsel to a *lion-comique* of the music-halls. It was all a matter of dress, and for the present his costume favoured the music-halls rather than the bar. He wore a soiled white waistcoat, and was in his shirt-sleeves.

"I am glad you see it in that light," replied Malahide. "And you know by previous experience, Mursell, that, though I don't brook mutiny, I am not a bad paymaster. I shall give you pretty nearly *carte-blanche* in the business, and a margin for yourself that will pay you better than turning out bogus bank-notes in this rat-hole at the imminent risk of detection."

"The game isn't what it used to be, certainly. It ain't the making 'em; it's the planting 'em that's the trouble," confessed Mursell with rueful frankness. "It was only as I was putting the tools and things away just now, when you knocked, that I noticed

my hole in the floor was chock up with stuff as I couldn't safely dispose of. And now tip us the office, Mr. Malahide. What is the little game to be, across the herring-pond?"

"I will tell you, but first a question. I remember your once saying that you had relatives at Victoria, in British Columbia. Are they still there?"

"You refer to my ever-respected mother, sir—also a sister," replied Mursell briskly. "No, they have left Victoria for a much farther outpost of civilisation. They are at Skagway in Alaska, which is a sort of jumping-off place for miners and others going north into the wilds about the headwaters of the Yukon and Pelly rivers. Alaska is United States territory. The old lady finds Uncle Sam a deal more congenial to live under than the Government of a British Crown Colony. She keeps what she calls a hotel there, though I should call it a saloon—and a gambling saloon at that."

Malahide made no secret of his satisfac-

tion. "It could not be better," said he. "That is the very place where you may have to operate, and as saloon-keepers your people will be sure to have friends—friends of the right sort, ready with pistol and bowie-knife. Now listen to me, Jake Mursell." And without hinting at his reasons or motives, he briefly related the story of Ned Shrimpton's return on the previous night, of his alleged *cachet* of gold, and of his confiding the secret of the locality to Dick Osborne. At which point Mursell interrupted with a whistle.

"You ain't ever going to start me on such a wild-goose chase as that!" he exclaimed. "Why, it's a hundred to one that the man was delirious, and that there's no gold at all. And if there was, it's fifty times that odds against my finding the place—even if I could manage to get that plan. You want me to forestall that barrister chap, eh?"

"Not at all; you jump to conclusions too quickly," said Malahide. "I wouldn't throw away the ten thousand pounds that I am

prepared to spend, if necessary, on such an off-chance of profit. No! it's this fellow Osborne that I am interested in, Jake. I must have him fixed up somehow out there—you understand? There is no need for me to tell you how. He stands in my way, and your mission is to remove the obstruction, once for all. It ought to be an easy matter in the lawless places he will have to pass through—Skagway, for instance.

Mursell eyed his prospective employer quite coolly. The proposition did not seem to stagger him in the least; he was only weighing the pros and cons.

"He may not go by Skagway. There is another route by St. Michael's and thence up the whole length of the Yukon by river steamer to Circle City," he said at last.

"The chances are that he will take the quickest way, which is by Skagway and over one of the passes," replied Malahide. "You will have to shadow him right from the start, and if he goes the other route, stick to him till you get your chance. I take it

that St. Michael's and Circle City are as rough as Skagway; you would only have to do without the advantage of having friends at court."

"When does he leave England?"

"That you must find out, but I think he is going at once," said Malahide, with a cruel little laugh. "He travelled up to town in the same train with me this morning, and I witnessed his parting with his friends at the station. From its nature I should imagine that it was the final one. His chambers are at 47, King's Bench Walk, Temple; so you had better pick up the trail there without delay. You will know how to discover when he starts, and then you can come on to me at my flat in Victoria Street and draw money for expenses."

"Right you are," said Mursell with the promptness of a commercial traveller booking an order. "As a barrister he will have a clerk or a share of one, and I ought to be able to get the tip that way. Failing him there's the laundress to fall back upon. Temple laundresses can mostly be squared

with two of gin cold. But I'll try the clerk first, and, as barristers' clerks feed about this time, I had better be off and catch him at lunch."

Malahide rose and watched Mursell curiously as the latter got into a well-worn black coat, and put away the few sheets of partly copied draft-paper that constituted the "dummy" signs of his ostensible business. Then when the inner and outer doors had been carefully fastened, the two men left the shabby retreat to silence and solitude.

"What about this place while you are abroad?" said Malahide thoughtfully, as they descended the stairs together. "It would not be advisable for your absence to excite remark."

"The shop must remain closed; there's no time to remove my little stock-in-trade," replied Mursell. "If you will stand the needful to pay the rent in advance, there will be no trouble. I am not likely to have any callers, and 'Boggs,' as you know, is a myth."

Outside Clifford's Inn the pair separated; Malahide hailing a cab to take him westward, and Mursell deftly threading his way through the busy throng to the seclusion of the Temple. Thence, after a few simple manœuvres in the neighbourhood of King's Bench Walk, he shortly emerged in the wake of an ink-stained youth whom he followed to the Cock Tavern in Fleet Street. Having marked down his game, he waited a little and then entered the bar, where the joint clerk of Dick Osborne and of a brother junior was munching a sandwich at the counter. To a man of Mursell's attainments the rest was easy. A stumble against the unconscious victim, and a profuse apology formed the prelude to a conversation which it was only natural should lead to an interchange of "drinks."

"In the legal line, I see," said Mursell presently, tapping a couple of tape-tied documents that protruded from the clerk's pocket. "On the way to Court?"

"No, worse luck!" was the despondent reply. "It's about the rummiest go I ever

heard of. One of my governors is returning his briefs to the solicitors, and two years ago he'd have given his head for so much as a smell of one! I'm taking 'em round now, and when I get back I expect I'll get the chuck—that is, *his* share of me will."

"Why, how's that?" said the sympathetic Mursell.

"He sails from Liverpool to-morrow for Montreal in the *Sarmatian* — subsequent movements kept strictly private," replied the clerk viciously. "In the middle of term, too, and been getting on so nicely. There's a screw loose somewhere, I should say."

"I really think there must be; been betting, perhaps," said Mursell. "Or maybe he doesn't know when he's well off."

And having no further use for his new friend, this busy law-writer and copyist looked at his watch and remembered that he had an appointment.

"This is going to be a big thing," he mused as he walked along the Strand to report to

his employer. "I wonder how Malahide—
queer name to choose—is going to fix it up
so that I can't round on him afterwards.
Usual game, I reckon—relies on my being
too compromised to split."

CHAPTER IV.

MOTHER MURSELL'S HOTEL.

IN the month of May, 1896, before the world had gone crazy with the gold news from the North, Skagway, on the narrow strip of Alaska that lies between the Pacific Ocean and the British territories, was not the busy place it has since become. A rude wharf fronting the inlet of the sea; something under a score of log cabins and frame shanties, and a good sprinkling of tents on the outskirts, met all the requirements of a population to a great extent transitory. The prevailing odour of the unpaved, unlighted "City" was a blend of seal-oil and salmon-offal.

Half-a-dozen of the larger log-cabins and frame shanties proclaimed themselves "hotels"

or "saloons," the most pretentious of these places of entertainment being a six-roomed frame dwelling-house, with an annex of a large log-built apartment for use as a bar-room. A board on the roof informed all comers that this was "Mother Mursell's Hotel," and the stranger, while feeling at once the attraction of feminine proprietorship, was also impressed with Mother Mursell's business acumen. The location for her hostelry had been judiciously selected close to the wharf, with an eye to catching travellers newly arrived by sea.

It chanced one evening, as the twilight was swooping down on the dull grey waters of the creek, and covering up the squalor of the dreary township, that the bar-room at Mursell's Hotel was nearly unoccupied. The public approach was by a door in the centre, having a couple of glazed windows—by no means a common luxury in Skagway—on either side. Down the middle ran a table, composed of planks raised on empty casks, and covered with a dirty green cloth denoting that this was the shrine of the gambler.

Across the end of the room ran the bar, a similar structure, but of higher elevation; and at the back was the door that led into the more private portion of the house.

Against the rude counter a man was leaning, talking in subdued whispers to a girl—a great strapping, raw-boned wench, coarse of feature and uncouth in gesture, yet just at this moment listening with all a gentle maiden's coyness to her admirer's gallantries. Hank Devine had lingered, after the departure of a batch of customers, to have a few words with Vick Mursell before "the boys" arrived for their nightly pandemonium round the green table. Devine, a good-looking American miner about thirty years old, was recently back from a fairly prosperous spell of work on the Stikeen river, and had promptly succumbed to the charms of Miss Mursell as those of the first woman he had set eyes on for eight months.

Though there were signs that the liking was mutual, it was evident that the course of true love was not running smoothly. The

sibilant hiss of the young lady's frequent allusions to a certain "she," and her nervous glances to the door at the back of the bar, suggested opposition and anticipated interruption.

"'Tain't no use," said the girl, after an impassioned appeal. "You know what she is, after cavortin' around here a month. She wants me to thump the pianner and draw the boys—says it out straight, she does, and no error. I should cry if harm was to come to you through me, and you'd best watch yourself, Hank. She swore she'd lay out the last feller that came sparking after me, and she'd a' done it, too, if he hadn't made tracks. It's a pretty hard crowd in Skagway, but I guess mother's as hard as any old tough of the lot."

"Waal, I dunno' as I ain't kinder favourable to imitating that last fellow o' yours," said Hank playfully, but hastening to add, as Vick withdrew her hand, "provided as you'd make tracks ter one and the same time. We might board the next boat for Victoria or Seattle, and get hitched there."

The girl's hand stole along the counter till it touched his again.

"I like you for saying that," she whispered. "But it wouldn't never do—nohow. Wherever we'd git to mother'd trail us, and—don't you mistake—she'd set ugly."

"Mebbe you wrong her," said the miner chivalrously. "It's her manner that's agin her, I reckon."

So intent was he on watching the play of Vick's expressive features that he did not notice that the door behind the bar had suddenly opened in time to allow the opener to catch his concluding sentence. Vick herself became aware of it first, and, turning quickly, carried Devine's gaze to the door, where a woman had paused on the threshold—a woman who held them both fascinated in awestruck silence as she entered, followed by a Chinaman bearing a huge petroleum lamp. Without a word she came round a gap at the end of the counter, and, apparently paying no heed to the frightened Vick or her cavalier, looked on critically, but still in silence, as the Chinaman suspended

the lamp in an iron ring over the centre table.

It was only by her skirt of homespun woollen stuff that the sex of Mother Mursell could be distinguished. About sixty years of age, tall, gaunt, and angular, with close-cropped iron-grey hair, and fierce masculine features, she must have come as a shock to those of her guests who were attracted by the maternal-looking sign-board. Her upper garment being nothing more or less than a miner's red shirt, she was often mistaken for a man when "bar-tending" behind the counter, and was addressed as "old hoss" or "captain" by strange customers.

Wishing with all his heart, but too proud, to slink away, Hank Devine continued to loll at the bar, and Vick to watch her mother's every movement with wide-open apprehensive eyes. When the Chinaman had retired, Mrs. Mursell proceeded to turn the lamp up to its fullest capacity, and taking two packs of dirty cards from her pocket tossed them on to the table. Then with a swift movement she produced a Colt's six-shooter from a leather

holster strapped across her hip, and aimed it straight, as it seemed, at Devine's head. Before he could realise what was happening, the report rang out, and a bullet crashed into the log wall an inch from his ear. Instinctively his hand flew to his own weapon, but a cry from Vick stayed him just as he recognised the difficulty of shooting his sweetheart's mother before her eyes.

"Keep still—for Heaven's sake, keep still!" shrieked the girl.

It was unpleasant advice to have to follow, especially as it had hardly been given when Mother Mursell's pistol banged again, and the ball splintered the woodwork close to his jaw. But this second miss on the part of a lady so handy with her shooting-iron reassured him, and guessing that she was engaged in the cheerful pastime known as "making a pattern" of his head, the young miner stood like a statue, till she had emptied the remaining chambers of her revolver, and a pear-shaped figure on the bullet-starred logs testified to her skill—and forbearance.

"So my manners is agin me, you great calf!" blustered the virago, proceeding to stuff fresh cartridges into her smoking pistol. "Now, there's only one word I'm going to sling at you, and that's 'Git!' You git out of this and stay out, or I reckon I'll make a different kind of play with your silly head next time. Vick Mursell's got to help me run Mursell's Hotel—poor, lone woman that I am—and she ain't got no time for sparks! No, not for lovyers or husbands or *nothink!*"

"You'd best be goin'," whispered Vick, perceiving that Hank was half inclined to stand his ground, and to, as she would have expressed it, "try a bluff."

The advice was accompanied by a significant push that warned him not to be rash. With a die-away glance at his fellow culprit that was meant to denote eternal constancy, and a cool "Well, good-night, ladies," he made for the public door, where, however, he halted when he was half way outside to look back.

"Steanner's in," he said laconically. "You'll

be having fresh company here directly. You'd best find yer manners, mother."

With which parting sally he beat a hasty retreat, pulling the heavy door to just in time for it to receive the final bullet which, as he had expected, the furious woman sent after him. In his flight he nearly knocked over a man, who passed him, and, pushing open the half-closed door, stood blinking in the smother of smoke which Mrs. Mursell's shooting had raised.

"Well, old lady, you seem to be giving a nice quiet tea party," said the new arrival. "If I had been ten seconds sooner you'd have welcomed your fond offspring with a lead pill."

"What in thunder!" screeched the grim landlady. "Here, Vick! Drat me if it ain't the boy! And what might you be doing out of Europe where you was getting on so nicely, Jake Mursell?"

Jake grinned all over his broad face, and shut the door carefully before replying. He was well and suitably dressed for travelling in a northern climate in summer, and looked

altogether more respectable than when he received Rupert Malahide in his cock-loft at Clifford's Inn. Vick had come round the bar and seemed inclined to be demonstrative, but Jake waved her off.

"Take a leaf from your mother's book, my girl, and conceal your affection," he said. "I shan't be hurt. I didn't look for a warm welcome, and what's more, I didn't want one, because I can't at present claim relationship. That is why I bustled up from the wharf ahead of the other passenger by the steamer. I have recommended the house to a young Englishman with whom I have travelled, and he'll be along in a brace of shakes. Remember, please, that I'm Mr. William Baxter, come to start a salmon-canning factory on the Taku river, and that you never set eyes on me before. Treat him well; put him in your best room, if you have got a room at all; and don't shoot him, old lady—at any rate, till I give the word. I'll explain later, for I reckon I hear him outside."

"Is there dollars in it?" queried Mother

Mursell in a hoarse undertone, her bloodshot eyes striving to read her son's face.

"A whole pile—if you don't give the show away with your out-West, cowboy-on-the-tear behaviour," replied Jake.

"And I'm to share?"

"There'll be a percentage."

"Then I guess I'll scoot, and put on a shawl or something," said the hotel-proprietress. "You fix it up with the Britisher when he comes in, Vick, and sling him some of those sweets you're so free with to that Devine feller. Best run him through into the house right quick. The boys will be along d'rectly—now the lamp's lit."

She had scarcely disappeared when Dick Osborne entered, followed by the half-breed porter whom he had hired to carry his baggage up from the wharf. For a moment he drew back in astonishment. The smell of gunpowder, the vanishing smoke-wreaths, the rough green table and the cards, the black bottles on the extemporised counter—all these were somewhat of a revelation to one

whose only previous American experience consisted of a week in a Pullman car and two days in a luxurious hotel at Victoria. But Jake Mursell stepped forward to reassure him, laughing cheerily.

"It's all right," he said. "I've just found that this is the place I was recommended to. It looks a bit rough, but this is only the saloon—corresponds to the tap-room in England, you know. The living accommodation is behind; and, anyway, my friend assured me it was the best house in Skagway."

Dick, though startled, was quite prepared to rough it, and quickly pulled himself together. "Oh, there you are, Mr. Baxter," he said. "I didn't see you for a moment in the smoke. I have no doubt the hotel is everything it ought to be; my only anxiety is whether they can take me in."

Vick Mursell came forward shyly, twisting her apron in her great red hands. She was not in the least afraid of the half-drunken miners and sailors, who nightly quarrelled

and blasphemed in her mother's saloon, but the quiet speech and gentle manners of this stalwart young Englishman cowed her. Instead of answering him with the slangy chaff which she would have hurled at an ordinary guest, she made an effort to be polite.

"There's no call to fret about that," she said. "We ain't got anyone stopping in the house, nor yet likely to—before the prospectors come down in the fall. There's a room for you, and another for J——, for this other feller, I mean. Come right through the bar, and I'll show it you."

Calling a Chinaman to mind the saloon, she led the way into the house, where on either side of a short passage four sleeping-bunks—they could hardly be called rooms—formed the sole guest accommodation of the "hotel." Round a twist in the passage was a small parlour, where the boarders, when there were any, took their meals; beyond this, again, was the Mursells' own lair, used for both living and sleeping in, and connected by a covered passage with

a detached shed, where a Chinaman did the cooking.

"That will be yourn," Vick said, indicating one of the cubicles to Jake. "And this 'un will be yourn, mister," she continued, standing aside for Dick to enter the wretched little den, whose only light came from the lamp in the passage through an opening over the door. There's a winder to it, yo see, as is handy in daytime; and that's more'n there is to the rooms on t' other side."

"Thanks, it will do very nicely," said Dick, trying not to look askance at the dirty bed. "I shall only be here a day or two, and I dare say it is a better room than I shall have for a long time."

"Goin' north, prospectin'?"

"To see the country," replied Dick, with caution; and signing to the half-breed to deposit his portmanteau, he paid the man and stood as though expecting to be left alone. But Vick still lingered in the door-way, apparently absorbed in the long check ulster which Dick had worn on the voyage. He

did not know whether to be amused or annoyed by the prolonged scrutiny.

"Do tell!" she murmured, lowering her voice lest her brother, who was seeing to his effects in the opposite room, should hear. "Do tell! That there coat's a disguise, ain't it?"

"No, indeed!" said Dick. "It is quite an everyday sort of garment, I assure you, Miss Mursell—if you *are* Miss Mursell."

"I'm Vick Mursell," the girl replied with true Western disdain for any but a military or a noble title. "Say then, you're an English lord, ain't you?"

"Not even that," laughed Dick. "What on earth put that into your head?"

"I read it in a dime novel," said Vick, with reproving solemnity. "A dime novel with pickshers, and the English lord in it wore a coat as like that as two shucks of corn. That's what comes o' book-learnin', ye see. You won't fool *me*."

And Vick Mursell departed, fully convinced that the dream of her life was fulfilled, and that she had set eyes on a real English lord.

MOTHER MURSELL'S HOTEL. 77

Nor during her subsequent dealings with Dick would anything persuade her that he was not a member of the peerage—a cherished belief that was not without its influence on his future fortunes.

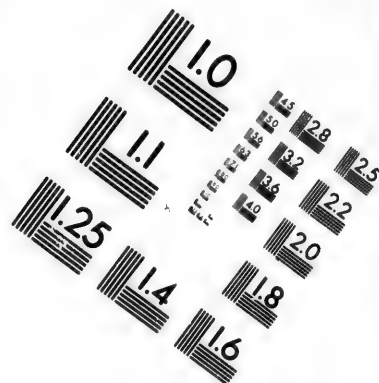
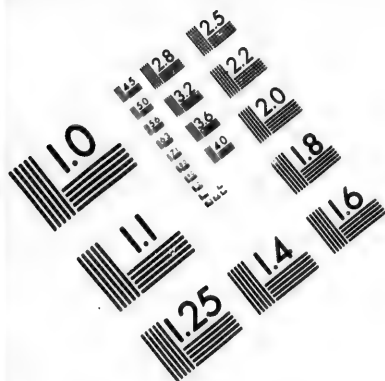
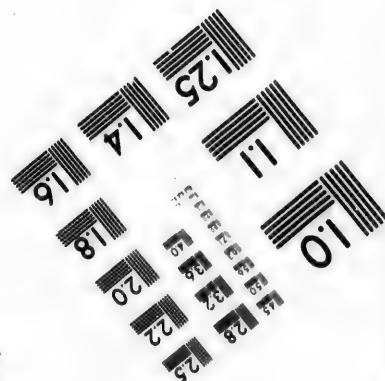
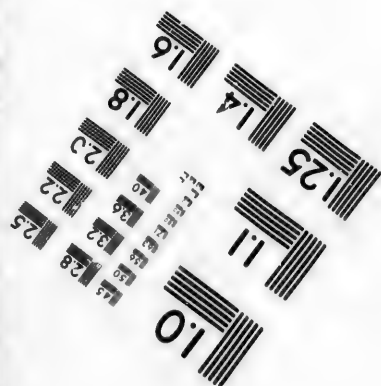
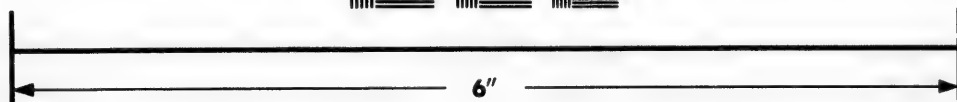
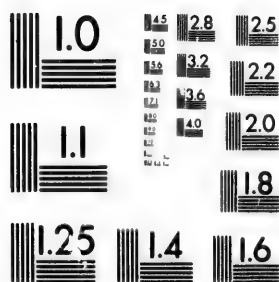


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CHAPTER V.

TREACHERY.

THE washing facilities at Mother Mursell's Hotel were not extensive, but having removed such as he could of the stains of travel with the aid of a tin basin and a broken crock of stale water, Dick went across and looked up "Mr. William Baxter." He found that worthy engaged in unpacking a modest valise, though in the short interval Jake had found time for a stroke of diplomacy. Slipping along to his mother's den, he had spoken a few urgent words, which resulted in Dick being spared the shock of meeting his landlady on that first night under her roof.

Jake had travelled from Liverpool and across the continent to British Columbia in the same steamer and in the same train as

Dick, but by booking steerage and avoiding him on "the cars" he had contrived to remain unnoticed till he intentionally put himself *en évidence* at the hotel at Victoria. An interchange of courtesies in the smoking-room had led to the discovery that both were going on by the coasting-steamer to Skagway, and Dick, without disclosing his business, had readily availed himself of "Mr. Baxter's" superior knowledge of the country. Jake, though quite truthfully disclaiming previous acquaintance with Alaska, represented himself as a native-born American engaged in the salmon-canning industry — a statement from which truth was largely eliminated.

Native-born American he certainly was, having first seen the light during the wild times of the Denver gold rush, on the very night when his late father, a renegade Englishman, had narrowly escaped being lynched for horse-stealing. And his mother was even more American, being the reputed daughter of a notorious "road-agent," who had died with his boots on while sticking-up the Black Hills mail-coach. But since his earliest

years, save for two visits at long intervals, Jake had spent his life in Europe; and his operations in Clifford's Inn, fishy though they were, had no connection with salmon.

"Here you are, Mr. Osborne!" said Jake, as Dick put his head into the cubicle. "I reckon we'd better see about supper. I've already bespoke some, and located the parlour. Here it is you see," as he piloted the way into the bare, evil-smelling room; "it isn't exactly Delmonico's, but it will have to serve for want of a better."

One of Mother Mursell's Chinamen brought in the corned-beef hash—the staple dish of Western hostelries—and the two travellers fell to with what zest they could on its fibrous particles. All things considered, they had a merry meal. Dick was far too eager to reach his goal to care what he ate and drank, and Jake laid himself out to be instructive and amusing. Not once did he risk exciting suspicion by evincing the slightest curiosity as to the Englishman's plans, while he was always ready to proffer information when asked.

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These tactics were so far successful that before the end of supper he had elicited all he wanted to know without putting a single question.

Dick asked him whether he thought it possible for a white man to cross the passes and explore towards the Yukon without employing an expert guide, taking only Indian carriers. And Jake, while advising him not to dream of going to those wild regions without securing the services of a hunter or miner who had been there before, knew well what his excellent advice portended. Dick would have to hang about at Skagway indefinitely, for he would hardly be able to select a man whom he could trust as a companion on such an errand off-hand.

Long before they had finished eating, heavy footsteps and gruff voices sounded outside, and presently the noise of uncouth revelry and the tinkle of a badly played piano came from the saloon. Dick began to evince a traveller's inclination to study the habits of the natives by gaining his first experience of an out-West bar-room, but Jake, for very good reasons,

discouraged the idea. He wanted to scrape acquaintance with his mother's customers and have a chat with his mother herself before Dick was allowed to make friends—or enemies. So he sat, smoking and making himself agreeable, till Dick grew sleepy and went off to bed.

Half an hour later "Mr. Baxter," after a judicious retirement to his own room, opened his door softly and strolled into the saloon, where he worked hard to become popular with the company. By the time the last customer had left, and the flaring lamp over the green table had been turned low, he had expended a good many dollars on Mr. Rupert Malahide's account, and by sheer alcoholic generosity had asserted his influence.

Throughout the convivialities of the evening, Vick, in the intervals of thumping the rattletrap piano, had kept a distrustful eye on her brother, and now, when he lingered in the deserted saloon, she seemed loth to leave him alone with her mother. A curt command to "git," however, was not to be disobeyed, and

she vanished, yawning, through the door behind the counter.

Mother Mursell poured herself out a nobbler of rye whisky, and dropped into the rocking-chair in front of the bar, whence she habitually presided over the nightly orgies. In the subdued light, amid the reeking fumes of vile spirits and plug tobacco, she looked like a witch holding court. For once her sex was distinguishable by means of the shawl with which, at her son's suggestion, she had covered her short iron-grey locks.

"Now, see here, Jake," she croaked. "I ain't set on allowin' any goin's on in my house as I ain't got a grip on. What's this game o' yours—bringing a tenderfoot Britisher along, and treating the crowd till they're ready to shout for ye?"

Without any beating about the bush, and in plain terms, Jake told her his own errand and the object that had brought Dick to Skagway. Not only did he want her assistance, but he knew by previous experience that if his mother did not have his whole confidence she would never rest till she had unearthed his

plans, thwarting him at every turn all the while. She listened with cold-blooded approval to his determination to finish the job out of hand, and expressed surprise that he had not made a chance to earn his reward on the journey out.

Jake grinned at his parent's cruder method. "I don't do that sort of work with my own hand unless I am driven into a corner," he replied. "Besides, I wanted to hear what you thought of that dead miner's yarn first, old lady. If there was any chance of its being true, it would be better to let Osborne go up to the Yukon, and carry out my commission on his way back. Provided he found that gold and brought it out, he'd be a deal more worth attending to than he is to-night. What's the odds about that *cachet* being a true bill?"

"No odds at all; it's a dead cert agin it," snapped Mother Mursell positively. "There's a sight of miners get the swell-head and talk that way when they've got the fever on 'em. There's gold up to the Yukon, but not big gold. Circle City is fuller of dead-beats than

miners, and that's a sure sign pay-dirt ain't been struck rich. And there's other trails for him to strike for home by without comin' nigh this place."

"So be it, then," said Jake; "I'll act on the bird-in-the-hand principle, and run the biz through at once. I had a kind of notion while I was mixing with your flock of lambs to-night. That big man with the carroty hair—Red Rube, I think they called him—he is a pretty hard case, eh?"

"Shoots on sight," replied Mother Mursell approvingly. "He drew on me once, but I was too quick and had the drop on him before he got his gun up."

"He's the man for my money, then," said Jake. "I'll have a talk to him to-morrow, and post you up in the programme after. By the way, what sort of a girl has Vick grown into? She seemed to have the blue devils to-night, and showed up vicious when Red Rube tried to squeeze her hand."

"Vick's growed into a tarnation fool," was the maternal comment. "The gal's a darned

sight too partickler to be the darter of a lone widder that's got to live by sellin' rum to miners. She's all soft sawder to some and pizon to others; but don't you worry about her. She's sulky to-night because I fired out her lovyer jest as you come in. She can't abide Red Rube at any time, though I opine he's a better man, and handier with his shootin'-iron, than the feller she's took with."

"Would she round on Red Rube if he made as though to kiss her?" asked Jake with brotherly interest, and so eagerly did he await his mother's reply that he failed to hear a slight, tremulous creak in the hinge of the door behind the counter.

"Not what you might call roundin'—she don't carry a gun," replied Mrs. Mursell contemptuously. "She'd squeak and holler, and, maybe, slap his face."

"That's good enough for me," said Jake cheerily. "Miss Vicky will have to play an innocent part in refreshing the family coffers. This Englishman's what you call a high-toned chap—Lord! how I hate the breed!—and if

he sees anything of that kind, he'll be sure to champion the female in distress. Then Red Rube will bite—see what I mean, old lady?" And mother and son chuckled so heartily that again the creak of the hinges escaped them, and the gentle closing of the door behind the bar.

In the meanwhile Dick slept soundly, for owing to Jake's generosity harmony had prevailed in the saloon that night. There had been no "circus," no "painting the town red" or burning of gunpowder to disturb his slumbers; and he awoke refreshed, and eager to complete his arrangements for an early start northwards.

The first step in that direction was to secure the services of a competent guide, who in turn would select the two Indian carriers necessary to transport his outfit over one of the passes to the head of the river. After making a solitary breakfast, "Mr. Baxter" having left word that he had risen early and gone to attend to his business, Dick strolled on to the waste ground in front of the house to look about him. Excepting a score of half-breeds

unloading a schooner at the wharf, there was no one in sight, and he was at a loss how to prosecute his inquiries. Seen now in the grey, sunless morning, the bare desolation of Skagway came upon him rather as a cold douche, but, nothing daunted, he turned away to explore farther afield.

"In England, if one wanted a trustworthy man, one would apply to the parson, but the clerical element seems to be at a discount here," he thought, as he began to pick his way between the rows of stores and saloons that constituted the main street. The population certainly seemed to be in need of spiritual guidance, to judge by the lurid oaths in which the passers-by indulged, and by the drink-sodden features of every two men in three whom he met. Skagway had not then awoke to a sense of its responsibilities; there was very little of the "hustling," go-ahead Western township about it; and it was chiefly peopled by failures who called themselves miners, but who did most of their mining in the pockets of the real workers, for whose return from distant gold-fields they lay in wait.

Dick entered one or two of the stores and made casual purchases, but the keepers of none of these places so impressed him that he cared to ask them to recommend a guide; and having traversed the town from end to end, he decided to wait till he saw "Mr. Baxter," and to ask him how he had best proceed. In the meanwhile he would return to the hotel and write a long letter to Beryl for despatch by the steamer that had brought him up.

He was getting down towards the wharf on his way back when, in passing the open door of a saloon, he caught a glimpse of the very man whose advice he was anxious for. "Mr. Baxter" was standing at the bar in close converse with a huge, red-bearded individual, who was picking his teeth with a bowie-knife and laughing boisterously at the respectable salmon-packer's remarks. Dick's first impulse was to go in and join them, but the drink-den looked such a fearsome place, and his late fellow-traveller's companion such an awful ruffian, that he checked it and passed on.

"Baxter seems to have picked up a typical desperado," he thought, "but I imagine that business here is hardly conducted as in Mincing Lane and Throgmorton Street. He is probably engaging the worthy with the knife to spear salmon, and the fellow certainly looks capable of spearing anything."

But Dick Osborne, though a stranger in a very strange land, was no fool. He had not scraped together the germ of a common-law practice without learning to look below the surface, and he walked on wondering whether it would be wise to seek counsel from a man who transacted affairs in such a place in such company. He remembered that the stake he was playing for was tremendous, and that the man he took with him into the wilderness should be above suspicion.

And then, suddenly, his dilemma was temporarily banished from his mind by the wonder of hearing his name spoken in a woman's voice. He had forgotten for the moment that he had any female acquaintance, even the most distant, on the American Continent, but on looking round he recognised the big young

woman who had shown him his room and taxed him with being a lord the night before. She was out of breath, and had apparently been trying to catch him before he reached "Mother Mursell's Hotel," which was visible a little way ahead.

"Morning, mister; I've been out for an airin', and I wanted to ketch yer," she panted inconsequently, when she had secured his attention. "Le'ss step round here a minnit; there's suthin' I've got to ask." And taking his consent for granted, she turned aside from the main street into a blank space between two stores. Dick followed, trying to divine the reason of this manoeuvre; but the next moment, as she halted and faced him, she explained it herself.

"'Twouldn't never do for me to be seen from the hotel a-talkin' to you," she said; "mother's such a holy terror. How was it you didn't come into the saloon last night to hear me play the pianner? Your friend Baxter was there, enjoyin' hisself like thunder."

"I was tired, and went to bed," said Dick, smiling at the naïveté of the question. In his amused surprise at this unexpected interview he forgot that "Mr. Baxter" had dissuaded him from going into the saloon, or he would have thought it strange that the salmon-packer should have gone himself.

"But you'll come in to-night, I reckon?" pursued Vick insinuatingly. "The boys mostly allows that I play the pianner lovely. That was me playin' last night. Mebbe you heard it over to your bedroom?"

Dick was very conscious that he *had* heard it, and thanked his stars that he had been too sleepy to be annoyed by the horrible discord. Politeness, however, required that he should put it differently.

"I am sure your customers are in luck to be provided with such an entertainment," he said. "I shall certainly make a point of looking in this evening."

"That's the ticket," said Vick, evidently much gratified. "I'll tap out somethin' touchin' — 'Home Sweet Home,' for ch'ice—jest to make

yer think of yer moated grange or castle keep across the seas."

"Very kind," murmured Dick, puzzled for the moment by the allusion; but recollecting her "dime novel" inspiration, he added: "That tune will be very appropriate, though it won't revive memories of granges and castles. I assure you, Miss Mursell, that they are not at all in my line."

Vick shook her great red forefinger at him in playful incredulity.

"G'long with yer — telling sech stories!" she insisted. "You oughter be ashamed, an' you all the time a-wearin' a lord's coat as ain't to be mistook. So yer comin' to hear me play to-night—honest Injun?" she concluded, with a quick reversion to the subject at heart.

"Yes, it's a promise," replied Dick, beginning to be bored, and making an involuntary movement to return to the street.

"Then I guess I'll scoot ter home this-a-way," said the girl, turning in the opposite direction, but facing about again to fire off the afterthought: "Got a gun?"

"You mean a revolver, I suppose?" replied Dick. "Yes, there's one in my baggage at the hotel."

"Shootin'-irons in valises ain't no use in Skagway," retorted Vick with much scorn. "You jest tote yer gun along with you, and draw *first* whenever there's a muss." With which parting advice she disappeared round the corner of the store, and made her way home at the back of the street. When, a few minutes later, Dick sauntered up to the hotel she met him on the threshold and bade him a civil "Morning, Mister," with a fine assumption of ignorance of their recent encounter.

Dick's concern about the invitation to the saloon did not last him much longer than the time it took to fetch his writing materials from his room and carry them into the parlour. He attributed the girl's eagerness for his presence to her pride in her "pianner playing," and to a desire to enlarge her audience. The mysterious secrecy with which she invested their meeting struck him as a little strange, but he accounted for it by

her openly expressed dread of her mother, whom he began to picture to himself as a starched and prim puritanical sort of old body who would have thought her daughter's conduct forward. And then he sat down and wrote a long letter to Beryl, dismissing the events of the morning from his mind except during the few scratches of his pen in which, for the amusement of his sweetheart, he described the uncouth product of the West who wanted to fascinate him with her music.

"You need not be jealous, dear," he wrote, "I don't think it's me she's in love with, but my trusty ulster, which, once the admiration of Glastonford, is believed by this angular young idealist to be the hereditary robe of a British peer."

When he had finished his letter he went out and posted it, and spent the remainder of the day in rambling about the place and watching the unloading of the coaster at the wharf. All the while he kept open eyes and ears for anything that might aid his purpose, but he saw no one whom he would care to

associate with him in the enterprise. The only people in Skagway with an ounce of work in them were the half-breed labourers; the white element was represented by slouching loafers, who, as the day wore on, swarmed in and out of the boozing dens.

At sundown he returned to Mursell's, more than half decided, if "Mr. Baxter" could not help him, to hire a couple of Indian carriers and start without a guide. But with the appearance of his late fellow-traveller at the evening meal in the parlour, the notion was at once airily waved into the background.

"Don't you worry about that. I'll find you a man—to-morrow," said Jake heartily. "I'd have offered to before if you had asked me, but I didn't want to meddle uninvited. I vote we chuck business for to-night, though, and drop into the saloon for a Western experience. If ever you think of writing up this trip, it might come in handy."

Dick disavowed any such intention; but mindful of his promise to Vick, and not

averse from a chance to kill time, he agreed to the proposal readily.

"By the way, you looked into the saloon yourself last night, after all," he said, recalling the discrepancy between "Mr. Baxter's" advice and practice.

Jake showed no curiosity as to who had been the informant.

"Oh, yes," he replied with great frankness. "After you went to bed the thought struck me that I might find a man there who would be useful—handy at canning fish, you know—so I changed my mind."

Before they had finished supper the hum of voices and the chink of glass told that the saloon was filling up, and at the close of the meal Jake suggested that they should go round immediately.

"Later on the boys are apt to grow noisy, and you might be scared," he said with a half-glance to see if the shot had gone home.

No Englishman, sound in wind and limb and a fair amateur boxer, cares to have the

possibility of fear hinted to him, and Dick rose with alacrity.

"Let us go by all means," he said rather stiffly. "But I shall not be in a hurry to come away early. I don't think I am likely to be frightened by a little horseplay."

Leaving the dwelling-house by the private entrance, they went round to the door of the saloon and entered, Jake leading the way to the counter, where two Chinamen were busy serving. The room was nearly as full as it could be, and the babel was deafening, though "the boys" were as yet fairly good-humoured. Every belt was an armoury of pistols and bowie-knives, and there was scarcely a face there on which crime or dissipation was not written in large letters.

"You'll have to treat the crowd; it's the custom of the country," whispered Jake. "After that you'll be free of the show."

Amused at the novelty of the scene, and making mental notes for Beryl's enlightenment on his return, Dick invited all present to refresh themselves at his expense, and when the ceremony, which was accepted as a

matter of course, was over, he leaned against the wall and watched the humours of the place. A game of faro was in full swing on the green table; weird blasphemies floated on the reeking air, and just as Dick was wondering who the terrible old woman in the rocking-chair could be, the tinkle-tinkle of the wretched piano drew his eyes to Vick, who, unseen before in the smoke, was seated at the instrument on the same side of the room as himself. He caught her glance fixed on him, but, contrary to his expectation, she did not appear to wish for his notice, for she instantly averted her eyes.

Like the drink and the atmosphere and the language, Vick and her music seemed to be taken as a matter of course by the frequenters of the saloon. Most of them were too busy playing or watching the play to pay her any attention; and, though they would have resented the absence of the "pianner" as detracting from the "high-toned style" of their haunt, it is doubtful if any of them even heard it. Unattractive as she was to him, Dick in his good nature

could not but pity the girl for the force of circumstances that had put her in such a position.

Suddenly there came about an exception to the lack of notice accorded to her—an exception in a very unpleasant form. A big, truculent-looking ruffian shouldered his way through the throng and stood by the piano, leering down at the player and worrying her with remarks which she first answered angrily, and then received in sullen silence. Dick recognised him as the red-bearded man whom he had seen in the rival saloon in the company of "Mr. Baxter" in the morning.

The fellow's behaviour was so clearly annoying the girl that Dick looked round for his mentor, thinking that if he knew the interrupter he might interfere in the girl's behalf. But though "Mr. Baxter" had been at his side a minute before, he had moved away, and was nowhere to be seen. At the moment when Dick made the discovery that he was alone and unsupported, the red-bearded man threw his arms round Vick's

ample waist, and tried to kiss her. She stopped playing, and struggled; a few of those at the table looked up and laughed; no one offered protection.

Dick braced himself, and in half a dozen strides was close to the piano. He had the true British notion that nothing but fists would be wanted over such a trifle, and those he was quite ready to use.

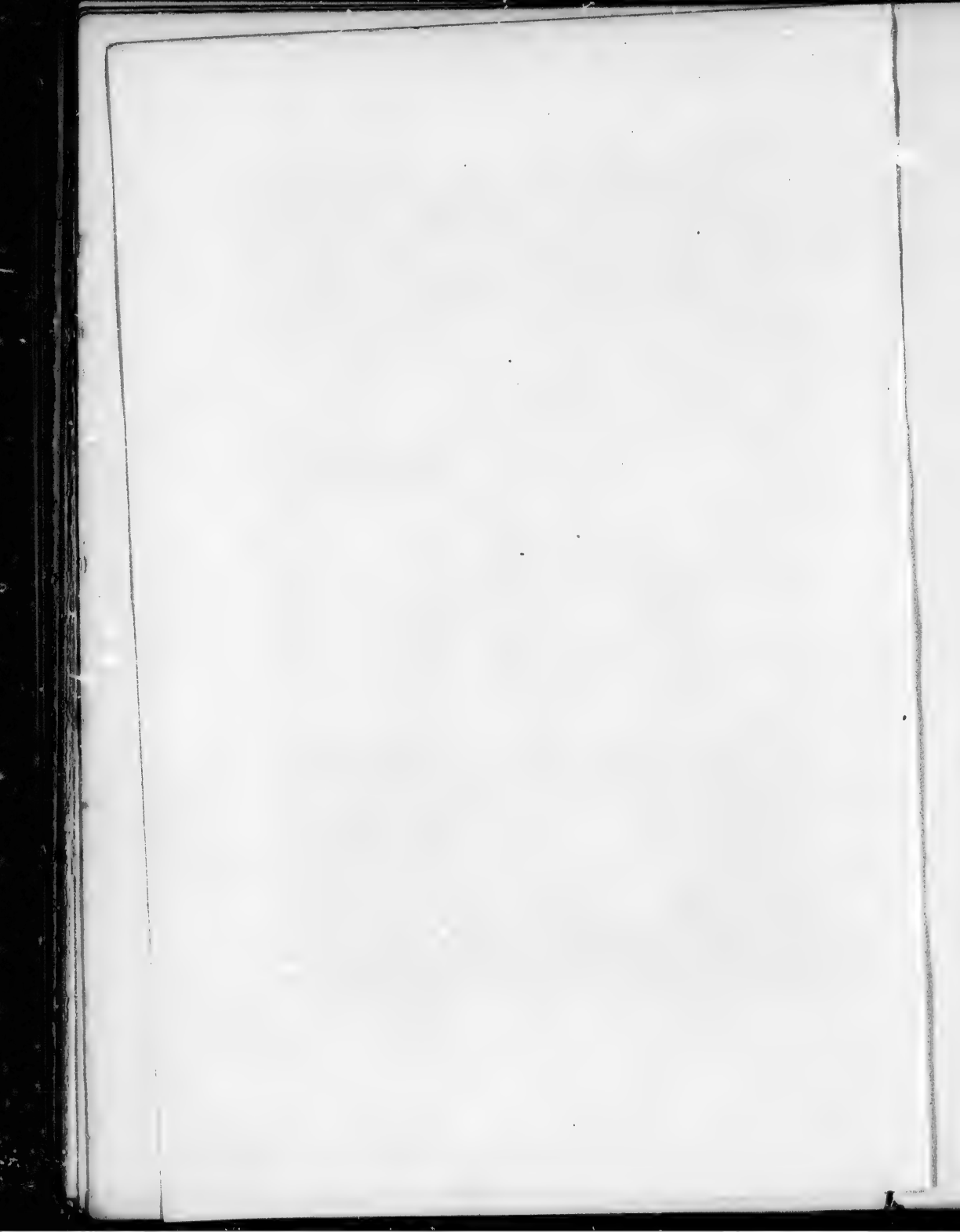
"Let go of her, you blackguard, unless you want your head punched," he said quietly, and an ominous silence fell upon the room. The gamblers looked round and craned their necks. In genuine surprise Vick's assailant did as he was bid, not realising that anyone could have dared to oppose him. Then, as he read grim earnest in the Englishman's steady gaze, he bellowed like an angry beast, and the nickelled barrel of a revolver gleamed in his hand. In another half-second it would have been levelled at Dick's head, but there came at that instant a great crash of glass, and all eyes were turned to one of the windows.

Through the broken pane another pistol-barrel protruded.

"Steady there, Red Rube!" cried a strong, clear voice from outside. "I've got the drop, I guess. Lower that gun ef yer don't want to die."



"'STEADY THERE, RED RUBE!' CRIED A STRONG, CLEAR VOICE FROM OUTSIDE.
'I'VE GOT THE DROP, I GUESS'" (p. 102).



CHAPTER VI.

A NEW ALLY.

DESPERADO as was Red Rube to his fingertips, he knew that if he did not obey that stern mandate from the window, his life would not be worth a moment's purchase. Forcing a boisterous laugh, he replaced his pistol in his belt and made a mock bow to Dick.

"Some other time, young feller," he snarled.

"See here, Mister Britisher," came the voice of the unseen through the broken pane. "That shop'll be too hot to hold you after this, I guess. Best jine me out here. I'll keep the crowd covered whilst you shove through."

After a moment's reflection, Dick decided

to take the advice. The scowls and rumbling curses of the majority told him that the weight of sympathy was with the red-bearded ruffian, and that, alone among so many, he could not hope to hold his own. Protected by the shining barrel of the invisible one, he made his way to the door, and was soon shaking the hand of his preserver outside in the darkness.

"I don't know whom I have to thank," he said, "but I'm none the less grateful."

"There's no occasion for that sort of talk; my name is Hank Devine," was the reply. "Yer traps are in the hotel, I guess?"

"Only a valise," said Dick. "I was intending to purchase an outfit here."

"Well, I reckon you'd best go in by the private door and fetch it, and then come along to my tent. You can stay there for the night anyhow," said the young miner. "We will talk later, but Mursell's is no place for you."

Though it was too dark to see his face, Hank's voice sounded pleasantly straightforward, and he had rendered such signal

service that Dick assented readily. But as an afterthought he added:

"Ought we to leave the girl at the mercy of that ruffian and his friends?"

The suggestion tickled Hank Devine vastly. "Never fear but what she'll be all right," he replied. "Vick can take care of herself in any crowd, and the old woman would drop anyone as meant her real harm. That skylarking was all a put-up job—jest to give Red Rube a chance to plug you, Mister. Better hurry; some of the boys are looking ugly towards the door."

So while Hank Devine kept watch at the broken window of the saloon, Dick went round and brought out his portmanteau, and the new acquaintances set out for the miner's tent on the outskirts of the town. When they reached it, Hank went in and lit the lamp on the pole and bade his guest enter.

"There's a spare buffalo-robe and a wolf-skin as will have to serve you for a bed, but you will be a sight safer there than between the sheets and blankets at Mursell's," said Hank.

Again Dick thanked him, and, while expressing curiosity as to what he had to fear at the so-called hotel, said he could hardly understand why a stranger should so befriend him.

Hank smiled as he filled his pipe, and Dick rejoiced that in this sink of iniquity he had at last met a man whose face would not hang him. Resolute and steadfast in their rugged setting, the eyes of the young miner were those of an honest man.

"Well, you're not exactly a stranger, and you put me under an obligation before I raised ever a finger," said Hank. "I'm jest as much obleeged as if what you did hadn't been ingincered by some rascal as is layin' for you."

And noting Dick's surprise, Devine went on to explain. Vick Mursell, he said, alluding to her as "the gal he was courtin'," had sought him that morning, he not being free of her mother's house, and had informed him that an English lord, staying at the hotel in disguise, was to be the victim of a deep-laid plot. She had overheard two persons whose names she would not mention, arrange

that Red Rube should be induced by a wager to attempt to kiss her in the saloon, their purpose being to provoke the Englishman to interfere, when Rube would be sure to shoot him. Though not at all alarmed on her own account, Vick was eager to prevent the crime, and she had devised the programme which had been duly carried out.

"But wouldn't it have been a good deal simpler if she had come to me and warned me not to go into the saloon?" said Dick.

"It might have been, but it 'pears to me she was afraid if she didn't get you out of the hotel they'd drop you some other way," said Hank thoughtfully. "She thinks a heap of me, that gal does, and she opined that if she made us friends I'd see you through. And so I will, by thunder! Another reason was, she's that set on English lords that she was keen on my having a hand in saving you."

"Well, I am not a lord, and I told her I wasn't," said Dick, laughing at the explanation thus furnished of the girl's eagerness for his presence in the saloon. The explanation was

a relief to him, for he had taken a liking to the uncouth wench of the pioneer town, and when Devine had called the event of the evening a "put-up job" he had half feared that she had had a very different motive in pressing for his attendance. He was glad to be still able to number Vick among his friends.

The night passed without further incident, Dick sleeping soundly enough, though his host, with a wider experience of Western ways, kept the proverbial one eye open. Before giving himself over to slumber Dick racked his brains for further light upon the alleged plot against him, but could find none. In doing so, it never occurred to him to hark back so far as England and Rupert Malahide's hostility; and, within his knowledge, no one on the American side of the ocean was aware of the vast stake he was playing for. "Mr. Baxter" was the only man with whom he had had any conversation, and he certainly had not mentioned the dead gamekeeper's millions to him. He could only conclude that Vick Mursell had overheard among her

mother's customers, whom she did not care to expose, some scheme of which a mere vulgar robbery from the person of a well-dressed stranger was the object.

In the morning, as he lay on the buffalo-rope watching his host brew the breakfast coffee, he was smitten with a sudden impulse.

"Have you ever been over the passes into the Yukon country?" he asked.

Hank gave him a glance of shrewd interest, but allowed the coffee to simmer up before replying. "Yes, I made the trip three years back," he said. "But I did no good there."

"Would you be willing to go again if I showed you that you could do yourself a lot of good by it?" asked Dick. "I want a true man to guide me over one of the passes and help me build a boat on the other side."

"You must open up a bit more freely before I can give you yes or no, Mister," said Hank. "I'm not in the market for a pig in a sack. Is it gold?"

"Yes, it's gold—and lots of it," said Dick. And, having decided to trust his new friend, he told how Ned Shrimpton had returned to

England to die, after imparting to him the secret of his discovery. He left it to be inferred that the secret was that of the locality of a new goldfield. He saw no necessity at present to disclose the fact that the gold was already won from the soil and hidden in a *cachet* whence he had only to fetch it.

Hank listened gravely to the end, stirring his coffee with his finger as he leaned against the tent-pole. Dick was prepared for a burst of incredulity; on the contrary, the miner emptied his mug at a gulp and slapped his thigh.

"Then it was a true bill," he exclaimed, "what that drunken little rat of a Britisher was whooping about!" And he went on to inform Dick that some few weeks before, he had been in one of the Skagway saloons—not Mursell's—when an Englishman far gone in his cups had been in a fair way to get himself shot for abusing the company generally. With characteristic good-nature Hank had persuaded him to leave, and had guided his stumbling steps to where his *protégé* was camped with a couple of full-blooded Indians

—an old man and a young squaw, who spoke good English.

"A real slap-up little beauty she was," said Hank enthusiastically, "and right-down put about to see that white man's plight. They were hunting and fishing Indians—regular good-class traders, not like these skulking *coyotes* of carriers that are no better than beasts of burden. Mebbe, the chap was married to the gal, or would like to be. But that ain't the p'int. All the time I was yanking him along to their camp he was hollerin' that he was worth millions—had only to stretch out his hand to pick 'em up, away to the Yukon country. And he gassed a heap about a chap he called the White Ghost, who had found the gold. I put it all down to the jim-jams—drink frenzy—at the time."

This was bad news to Dick. He remembered Ned Shrimpton's allusion to his rescuers—two Indians and a white man, who had "treated him like Christians and brought him safely out of the wilderness." The description given by Hank suggested that these might be

the same people, and that Shrimpton had been mistaken as to the character of at least one of them, though how the drunken white associate of the Indians could have gained a knowledge of the gold was a mystery.

The possibility of being forestalled at the *cachet* made Dick the more eager to start, and again he pressed Hank for an answer. This time it was given readily, and was in the affirmative. The two men shook hands on the bargain, and fell to discussing the outfit which it would be necessary to buy. Devine was well provided, but a rifle and a few tools were needed for Dick's equipment, as well as blankets, boots, and portable cooking-utensils. And, most important of all, a stock of flour, bacon, and canned stores had to be laid in for their subsistence in a country destitute of all supplies save deer-meat and fish.

Hank said that all these things could be procured in an hour, and that then there remained only the engagement of a couple of carriers. With luck they should be clear of the town by noon—without any of the Red Rube crowd being the wiser.

"Which route do you propose to take?" asked Dick.

"Over the Taiya," was the reply. "There ain't much to choose between them, but I know that road better than the White Pass."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a shadow darkened the entry, and both occupants of the tent faced round, Devine's hand going like lightning to his belt. But it was a typical picture of peace and amity that met their gaze. There stood "Mr. William Baxter," his broad, smooth-shaven face blandly smiling at them, and his hand extended in friendly greeting to Dick.

"My dear Mr. Osborne, this is indeed a relief," he began. "I felt in some sense responsible for having taken you into that horrid den last night. And then to think that I should just have run back into the hotel for a cigar at the critical moment when that ruffian threatened you! I could not reproach myself sufficiently when I returned and heard what had happened—more especially as no one seemed to know what had become of you. Mrs. Mursell, our excellent

hostess, is real out up about it. She begged me to say, if I found you and could induce you to go back, that she will stake her reputation against anything of the kind occurring again."

Dick could not forget that he had seen this man, of whom he really knew nothing, in Red Rube's company. "Thanks, but I don't blame you," he said curtly. "I have no intention of going back."

"If the old lady's bent on wagerin', it's a pity she ain't got anything more valuable than her reputation to ante up with," interjected Hank.

Jake glanced at the miner, and for the fraction of a second failed to keep the malice out of his eyes. "It's a free country," he said; "every man is entitled to his own opinions. Well, Mr. Osborne, if you won't come back to the hotel you won't, and perhaps you are the best judge. But there's a trifling formality you omitted last night—the paying of your bill. The old woman knew it was an oversight, of course, and that you'd rectify it as soon as you found it out; so she

gave me a receipt for the amount to hand you in exchange for the cash if I found you. She was terribly anxious, you see, that you shouldn't be driven to return to the hotel for the purpose if you had decided to give it a wide berth. Sort of proud feeling about the old lady, I reckon."

Dick flushed with an honest man's annoyance at being reminded of his unintentional omission, which, under the circumstances of his departure, had been natural enough. And his late landlady's forethought in sending the bill receipted looked like an act of delicacy that made his regret more acute. He pulled out the money and handed it to Jake with many expressions of thanks and apology."

And now," said Mr. Baxter, "is there anything else I can do for you before I go about my business? The guide you spoke of, for instance? I think I could bring you a good man."

"Thank you, that will not be necessary now; I am leaving the town almost immediately," replied Dick; and then, not liking

to be ungraciously reticent after the slight service rendered by "Mr. Baxter," he added: "Mr. Devine here is going with me."

"I concluded as much," said Jake, with a benevolent smile at Hank. "Well, if I can't be of any use, I'll clear out. So long, and good luck to you."

When he had gone Hank went to the door of the tent and watched his broad figure till it disappeared among the log cabins of the town. Not till he was very sure that he would not be overheard did he turn to Dick and say:

"Did ye ever hear sech a barney as that before?"

"It's a great nuisance," said Dick, whose mind was still running on the unpaid bill. "I cannot think why I didn't stay to settle the account, but you drove it out of my head with your haste."

"Bah! that's nothing," Hank blurted with contempt. "I was alludin' to the manner of collecting the cash. Whoever heard of old gal Mursell studyin' folks' feelings before? That's rich, that is. Ever see her?"

Dick had to admit that he had not come face to face with the proprietress during his short stay at the hotel.

"Well, then you won't understand," continued Hank, "but the yarn that feller pitched won't wash—with anyone as knows Mother Mursell. She's got some darned good reason for not wishing you to go nigh the saloon. Whether the joker as brought the message is aware on it or not, I can't say. Are you well acquaint with him?"

"I travelled up with him from Victoria," replied Dick. "He knows nothing of me or my affairs except that I am going prospecting on the Yukon."

"Well, there's no tellin'; you might have talked in your sleep," said Hank. "Anyway, we'd better change the route and use the White Pass instead of the Taiya. He come in jest as I said we'd go that road."

Which was true enough as far as it went, but Hank forgot that in comparing the merits of the two passes he had mentioned the White Pass *last*. Anyone who had not heard the commencement of his sentence would have

drawn quite a different conclusion from that which he had conveyed.

So long as a prompt start was made, all routes were the same to Dick, and the White Pass having been selected, they sallied forth to make final preparations. By noon everything, even to the engagement of two Indian carriers, was complete; Hank's tent, which it was not proposed to take, was packed and left with a friendly storekeeper; and the party moved away from the group of wind-stunted firs that had sheltered the young miner's encampment.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE WHITE PASS.

FOR six miles along the river flats from the landing-stage to the foot of the mountain there was a waggon track, and in order to reach this apology for a road it was necessary to pass Mursell's hotel. The saloon door stood open, but a grey mist had driven up the Lynn Channel from the sea, obscuring the sun; and, as they went by, their eyes could not penetrate the dark interior. Dick, who did not know the ways of the place, saw nothing out of the common, but Hank was struck by the strange silence. It was an hour when "the boys" were apt to drop in for a mid-day quencher.

The unusual aspect of the saloon, and a desire to say good-bye to Vick before an

absence that might last for months, caused the honest miner to grow fidgety, and when they had gone on a hundred yards he halted in his tracks.

"Ever do any courtin', mister?" he said abruptly.

Dick was a little staggered by the unexpected question, but he nodded a smiling assent. "Run back by all means," he said, grasping the situation. "I will go on slowly and wait at the road-head."

But Hank overtook him before he and the heavily-laden carriers had traversed half the distance.

"Dunno what's come over that old saloon," said Hank dolefully. "There's one of the Chinamen bar-tending, and only a couple of dead-beats sittin' around waiting for chances. Me and Vick will have to do without the parting word, I guess; but what's become of the boys licks me."

With which deliverance he put himself at the head of the party and strode along in silence, only turning occasionally to urge on the ambling Indians. Dick, with a fellow-

feeling, respected what he thought was the cause of his mood, and made no attempt at conversation till they came to a bend in the road where they got their last glimpse of Skagway. The miserable collection of log-cabins and tents, flush with the grey waters of the river's mouth, was scarcely visible at the end of the vista of waggon ruts; and what was visible looked dreary enough in its colourless desolation. But it was all they expected to see of civilisation for months to come, and the two white men halted and looked back.

"No one followin' us, anyway," said Hank, with a sigh of mingled relief and sentiment, as they resumed their march. "I've been sort of uneasy about that saloon being so quiet. Seems as if the boys were up to mischief. I'm glad we changed the route. I should smile if they've gone up to lay for us on the Taiya."

"Do you think it's likely?" asked Dick.

"Red Rube bears malice," said Hank laconically. And there's others behind Rube," he added—"them as set him on to bait you

last night. I wish I could have seen Vick again—to pump her a bit. Mebbe she'd a' told on 'em now."

Having to accommodate their pace to the laden Indians their progress was slow, and the six miles of level ground took them over three hours to accomplish. It was nearly four o'clock when they reached the termination of the track and struck into the broken ground, which, growing rougher and steeper at every step, became after another mile a difficult and perilous ascent. In the month of June, when the trail is not choked by snow, the way to the summit of the White Pass is far from insurmountable, and the mountain which here rises only two thousand six hundred feet would be a pigmy to Alpine climbers; yet it is full of pitfalls for the unwary, and at intervals bristles with points of danger.

At a spot about three miles from the foot of the mountain the trail runs through a box canyon, with precipitous sides, and blocked at the upper end by another precipice forming an apparently impassable obstacle. By many hours' arduous climbing a man in

good condition and unhampered might surmount it, but to carriers laden like packhorses the stupendous cliff barred the way. The difficulty, however, had been to a great extent removed, as Hank Devine very well knew, by a rope attached to a pine stump at the top and left dangling for the benefit of the few travellers who passed that way. By the time this description is printed it will have ceased to be accurate, for it is probable that the rocks will have been blasted and that a zigzag path will wind up the cliff face.

There was but an hour's daylight left when they came to the foot of the precipice, and Dick suggested that it would be a good place to camp for the night. But Hank shook his head.

"We'll sleep sounder at top," he said. "Ef Rube and the boys are on our track we can smile at them from up there."

Dick saw the force of the argument. The spot where they stood was the termination of a natural *cul de sac*, with frowning walls of rock on three sides of them, and, behind, the rugged path by which they had come—

by which, also, anyone would *follow*. They began the ascent of the precipice at once, the Indian carriers climbing like cats with the aid of the rope, and the two white men bringing up the rear.

When Dick at last swung himself over the brink he found himself on a fairly level plateau of about a hundred yards square, hedged in on one side by a shelving bank of broken boulders, on the other by a deep chasm fringed with wind-stunted pines. Directly to the front the trail led on and upwards over a natural causeway with precipices on either hand. They were still a long seven miles from the summit of the pass, and in the fast fading light the scene was one of lonely grandeur. The gradations were nowhere abrupt, but sloped to the sky line in a billowy sea of chaotic ridges, cleft sharply in many places by deep ravines and dark, silent canyons, at that season of the year full of emptiness, but a few months later to be choked to the brim with drifted snow.

Hank selected for their camp the shelter

of a boulder close to the tree to which the dangling rope was made fast, so that they could command the approach from the settlement. He was for making matters doubly secure by drawing up the rope, but Dick overruled him, pointing out that it would not be fair to any honest wayfarers who might come along to block the route entirely. It was arranged instead that they should sleep in turn, one remaining always on guard at the rope-head. As they had plenty of cooked provisions at this early stage, and it was too dark to search for fuel, they agreed not to trouble about a fire, but to eat their supper and then commence their alternative watch so as to be up and away betimes in the morning.

Long before they had finished their frugal meal the last ray of daylight had disappeared, and the gloom was so intense that they could hardly see the weird outline of the tree that overtopped the precipice. Dick did not know what nerves were, but none the less he was glad of the stalwart young miner's company, and persuaded him to sit awhile and chat

before one of them went to sleep. The subject of their talk was naturally the enterprise they had undertaken, and it was while Hank was repeating with fuller detail the assertions of the drunken Englishman that a slight alarm occurred. With sunset the sea breeze had died away and there was a deadly silence. In a pause of Hank's voice a pebble rattled not ten paces away. He sat up and handled his Winchester, but no other sound followed.

"It must have been one of those blamed Injuns," he said, after a long wait, alluding to the carriers who were already sound asleep. "I could have bet, though, that the noise came from further to the left than them."

The sound was not repeated, but the conversation thus interrupted was not resumed. Hank took up his position close to the brink, and Dick curled himself up in his blanket for a spell of sleep. Before he dozed off, a thought struck him, and he tore a leaf from his pocket book and scribbled, as best he could in the dark, the name and address of his father in England. Calling Hank, he gave him the paper, and made him promise to write

to Glastonford "if anything happened" during the expedition.

"If you go under, I guess you mean," said the miner bluntly. "I ain't no great shucks at pen-work, but I'll make 'em see the run of the biz somehow."

Hank's watch passed without incident, and Dick took his place in the small hours, on the understanding that he should arouse the whole party as soon as it was light enough to see. He felt a pleasurable sense of novelty and excitement that made the time pass quickly. Though he had never shared to the full Hank's apprehensions of a sequel to what he regarded as a common bar-room quarrel, the mere fact of standing, rifle in hand, on guard against a possible foe, on an American mountain-side in inky darkness, thrilled him with fresh enthusiasm for his task. He had been conscious of a strange helplessness amid the unfamiliar black-guardism of that weird settlement below, but up here in the fresh air he was himself again. The instinct of the sportsman was upon him, and he realised that he had at last made a

practical start towards his goal—the goal which was to give him Beryl.

As the first faint greyness stole into the eastern sky, he was recalled from dreams of the future to present happenings by something that for one brief moment made him think he was a boy again, fishing for carp in the pond at Glastonford Vicarage. He had gathered the slack of the rope, where it was hitched to the trunk, and held it under his arm, as he leaned with his back to the tree. Suddenly he got a bite. The rope was jerked free of him, and then tautened. Someone was coming up the ascent.

Dick called softly to Hank, who awoke at once, and together they waited, not knowing what to expect. The light grew gradually, but not enough to show them what manner of traveller was swaying and struggling for foothold below on the jerking rope. Not even as they stood aside with rifles ready to receive the indistinct figure that at last struggled over the brink did they recognise it till a woman's voice spoke—

“That you, Hank, boy?”

It was Vick Mursell, bare-headed, nearly unshod, with her gown torn to tatters, who stood before them.

"Lem'me get my breath," she panted, as her lover drew her from the perilous edge. "Thank God I'm in time. Red Rube and five of the worst kind are up here somewhere layin' for you; I overheard 'em plannin' it, and mother ketched me. She locked me in the kitchen lest I should give 'em away, but I broke loose and follered. Seems as ef I'd been walkin', walkin', over rocks all night."

"They've headed us, then?" said Hank shortly.

"I guess so; they started two hours afore noon," said Vick. "They was a-gwine to wait till yer got well on the Pass; then there wouldn't be no bother with the Sheriff about yer bodies. I've come 's quick as I could," she finished, sobbing.

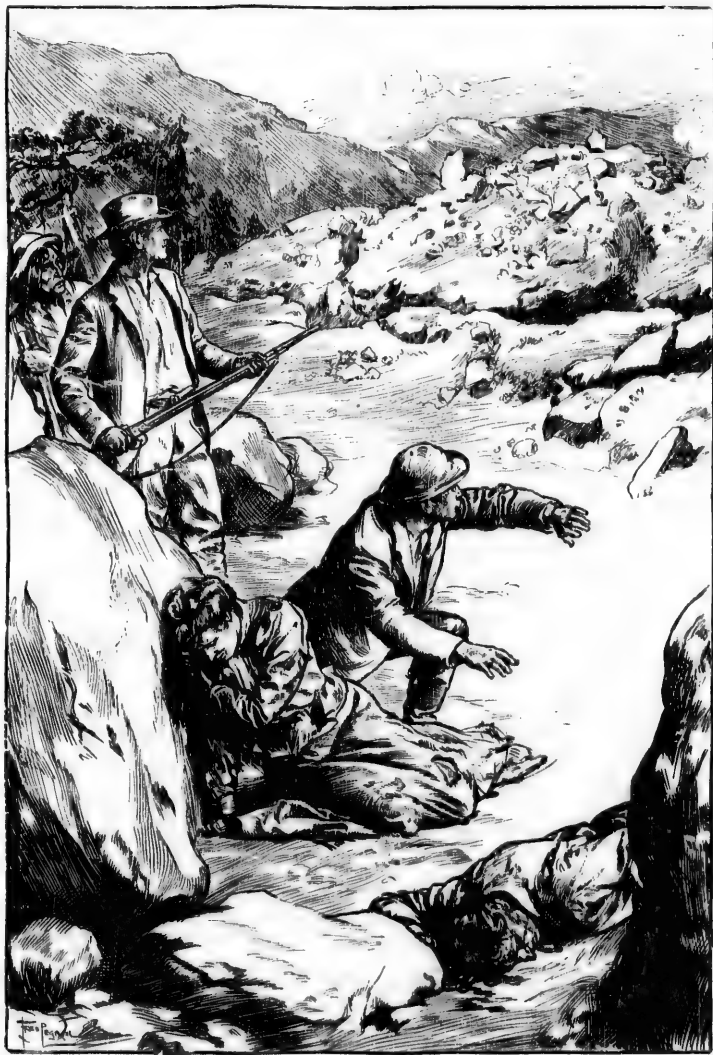
They soothed her and made much of her, and while they did so and tried to draw her story from her, the sun rose behind the range, bringing into dim relief the grey rubble of shingle and boulders that flanked one side of the

plateau. The little group at the edge of the precipice was sharply silhouetted against the sky.

Suddenly from one of the higher levels beyond the narrow chasm a puff of smoke darted between two rocks, and a bullet whizzed through the brain of one of the Indian carriers. Another and another followed in quick succession. One went singing wide over the ravine, but the next moment there was a cry of horror as the third ball from the ambush hit Vick Mursell in the shoulder and brought her to the ground writhing in agony. Hank sprang forward and, stooping down, tried to shield her with his body as two more bullets flew by. For a moment all was confusion, but seeing that Hank was unmanned by his brave sweetheart's pain, Dick pulled himself together and took command. The girl must be saved at all cost.

"Get her down the rope, man!" he cried. "She'll be out of their aim directly you're over the edge. I'll try and stand them off from behind this boulder."

In desperation Hank raised Vick, and with her in his arm swung himself over the brink;



"HANK SPRANG FORWARD AND TRIED TO SHIELD HER WITH HIS BODY"
(p. 130).

intending to return as soon as he had placed her in safety at the foot of the precipice. In the meanwhile Dick had sprung to the scanty cover of the boulder where the surviving carrier was already sheltering. At the girl's fall the firing had slackened, but now it began again with redoubled fury, warning Dick with the leaden hail that plashed all round the boulders that it would be fatal to show himself. Once in a brief lull he tried to peer out in the hope of getting a shot at the enemy, but a ball through his hat caused him to draw back.

While Dick lay thus, wondering what was to be the end, Jake Mursell emerged from behind another boulder close by, and waved a signal to the ambushed platoon. Then he walked to the edge of the precipice and looked over, taking care that he was concealed from Dick by the intervening rock. Having assured himself that Hank and Vick had reached the bottom, he drew a clasp-knife and cut the rope, rendering impossible the return of the miner for many hours.

Dick Osborne was alone with his foes.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAD NEWS.

It was Mr. Rupert Malahide's practice to breakfast alone and unattended. When the butler had pulled back his chair, removed the covers from the silver dishes, and given a last touch to the liqueur stand, that well-trained servitor would retire noiselessly, leaving his master to an unobserved perusal of the morning's correspondence.

So it was that one bright morning in mid-summer when the master of the Abbey sorted over his letters, there was no one to note the hawk-like eagerness with which he pounced upon a certain yellow envelope bearing a United States stamp. There were no prying eyes to perceive how his thin lips tightened over the white teeth as he tore the letter

open, or to draw deductions from the heightened flush that tinged his sallow cheek as he read—

Skagway, Alaska.

DEAR SIR,— You may regard the mission upon which you sent me out as practically brought to a successful conclusion. I only arrived at this place the day before yesterday, so you will allow that I have been tolerably expeditious. There was some trouble in the saloon here last night, and I have just concluded arrangements by which the aggrieved party will obtain prompt redress. He starts in an hour's time with five or six of his friends for the White Pass, where it is proposed to wait for the aggressor and adjust all differences. I have decided to accompany the party with a view to being quite sure that nothing is omitted to secure a satisfactory settlement.

I write this beforehand, as it is not certain whether the steamer which brought us up will sail on the return trip to Victoria before I can reasonably expect to be back in Skagway.

Yours faithfully,

JACOB MURSELL.

The language was necessarily vague in case the letter miscarried, but Rupert Malahide, reading between the lines, grasped its meaning clearly, and it filled him with elation. He glanced through the oriel window of the breakfast-room, down the long vista of his

own park, to where the Hall lay in the valley bathed in the morning sunlight.

"Good old Jake!" he chuckled. "What a gift it is to know how to choose one's tools! I thought that this was a case for a fox rather than a tiger, and this confirms my judgment. I wish, though, that he could have got back in time to catch the steamer with the report of—an accomplished fact. However, I dare say that will follow quickly enough, and then sooner or later there will be another deluge of tears down there—more copious than the last."

The allusion, in which this man seemed to find pleasure, was to a great grief which had fallen on Beryl Asquith a fortnight after her lover's departure. The squire had died suddenly of heart-disease, leaving her a tangle of debts and embarrassments to unravel, and with no friends at hand to help save staunch old Aunt Rebecca and the family solicitor. From the latter the girl had learned, even before the first shock of her trouble was over, that Mr. Malahide, of the Abbey, held her prospects in the hollow of his hand, and it

was small consolation that the hated "Ogre" had outwardly said and done everything that was polite and gentlemanly. She had been, so far, spared a direct knowledge of his designs, but her womanly instinct was beginning to show her how he meant to use his power.

Isolated and shunned though he was, Malahide doggedly pursued the routine of a country magnate, and having finished his breakfast and his correspondence, he went out to make his daily inspection of stables that would have been adequate if he had been on visiting terms with the whole county. It was his custom on these occasions to learn the news from his stud-groom, a time-serving individual, who quite understood that one of his functions was to keep in touch with local gossip for his master's behoof.

"Well, Simmonds, is there anything fresh this morning?" asked Malahide, as he strolled across the yard after completing his round.

"There's a rare how-d'ye-do down at the Vicarage, sir," the groom replied. "The

parson has had some bad news about his son —him as went to America in the spring. I couldn't rightly get to the bottom of it—some say he's dead and some say he's missing—but there's no question something is up. Old Mr. Osborne has been in a terrible taking since the post came in this morning."

Malahide made no reply, and, dismissing the groom at the entrance of the yard, turned into the park, thinking deeply. It puzzled him that the Vicar should have received news of some disaster to Dick, and yet that Jake Mursell should not have supplemented his report with another stating that, in his own words, "he had secured a satisfactory settlement." The letter to Mr. Osborne, by whomsoever written, must have left Skagway in the same boat as the one which he had just received from Jake, and his emissary should therefore have had time to write a second letter confirming the anticipations of the first.

"Possibly Master Jake got bowled over in the scrimmage," he reflected, "though it is hardly like him to put himself in the way.

On the whole I should regard my worthy messenger's taking-off as rather an advantage, provided it was a clean kill without any death-bed confessions. I think I will walk down to the Vicarage and condole. I must know all there is to know."

Glastonford Vicarage showed no outward signs of the thunderbolt that the post had launched upon it. Everything looked calm and peaceful in the noontide sunshine; the bees were humming in the flower-beds; the front door stood open; and Malahide was quick to observe that the blinds had not been drawn down. No certain news of Dick's death could have come to hand.

"Tell Mr. Osborne that I should wish to offer him my sympathy, if he can see me," said the owner of the Abbey to the neat maid-servant who answered his ring.

The Vicar shared the general dislike of his wealthy neighbour, but he was in the frame of mind to lean on anyone, and Malahide was shown into the study. The visitor's sallow face was a picture of deep concern, as he wrung the old clergyman by the hand.

"I have heard a rumour—several rumours, in fact—of your trouble," he began. "I could not rest till I learned the real truth, and if I could be of any use to you——"

"You are most kind," said Mr. Osborne, nearly breaking down. "I am afraid that I have lost my boy. This letter will tell you as much as I know myself."

It was an ill-written scrawl which the Vicar handed him, but Malahide's keen eyes went straight to the date at the top and found no difficulty in deciphering the figures. The letter had been written at Skagway two days later than that of Jake Mursell. The subsequent silence of the latter was beginning to be remarkable. Excepting that the spelling has been corrected, this is what Malahide read with eager curiosity:—

SIR—I ain't worth a cent at writing, so please to excuse errors. I was about starting for the Yukon with a Britisher named Osborne as gave me your address. The boys was down on him for some reason unbeknown, and there was a bit of a circus with Red Rube as made me uneasy. We had got on to the White Pass to a place at top of a tall cliff when a gal I'm courting come up. She'd been following all night

to give us the office that Rube and five old Skagway toughs was laying for us somewheres up the Pass. Whiles she was talking shooting began. One of our Injun carriers was stretched out, and my gal was hit. Lead was coming over thick, and Osborne told me to get the gal down the cliff, and he'd do the best he could. I hated to quit, but Vick being mortal bad and in danger of another bullet, I toted her down the rope out of fire. I'd laid her at the foot, and was just starting to go up again when the rope was cut at the top. Seeing as it would have took three hours to climb, and the gal being like to bleed to death, I started to carry her back to the township, reckoning as it would be all over with Osborne before I could get to him if I stayed to climb. And I am nigh sure he was laid out already, seeing as about the time the rope was cut the firing stopped.

After I had got the gal to home I went out with three men I could trust, and we climbed the cliff. But, what with me carrying Vick to Skagway and having to climb, it was twenty-four hours before we struck the top, and there was nary a trace of Osborne nor yet of the skunks as laid for us. 'Taint likely as he could have fixed up the whole caboodle, so I reckon Red Rube's crowd put him and the carriers, after killing 'em, down a hole, which there's a good few without a bottom thereabouts, and then scooted for Juneau or some place further down the coast. Anyway, they ain't showed in Skagway since, and the fight was day before yesterday. I feel real mean about it, for he was a nice young feller, but if his friends go for to blame me, they must remember I had the gal to think of.

There was a commercial—name of Baxter come up here same boat as Osborne, and he ain't been seen

since the fight. I can't find he was in the biz and Vick says no, but I can't say as I cottoned to him somehow.

If any news comes in will keep you posted.

Yours with respect.

HANK DEVINE.

In his agitation the Vicar paced the room with his head downcast, while Malahide was reading; and the latter, believing himself unobserved, relaxed something of his facial control. His feelings were those of mingled triumph and perplexity, and they appeared on his countenance in quick succession. The news sent by this man Devine seemed to point to the attainment of his object; but why had not Jake written? He was clearly not suspected at Skagway of having had a hand in the attack on Dick; so why, if he was alive, had he not returned to the township? And if he had been openly present at the murder, which was very improbable, and Dick had killed him, where was the body? The hired desperadoes would have had no reason for concealing it. On the contrary, they might have used it as an excuse for their attack, alleging that Dick had fired the first shot. There was a

mystery somewhere which Malahide did not like.

"This is very terrible, Mr. Osborne; your suspense must be unbearable," he said handing the letter back. And then, affecting a sudden burst of generous enthusiasm, he added: "I will tell you what I'll do; I will go out to Skagway, and leave no stone unturned to get at the truth of this wild story."

Clutching at any straw, the Vicar turned to him with gratitude and acceptance on his lips, but before the words came a deep bass cough drew the attention of both men to the open French window. There stood Aunt Rebecca, her wizened little face puckered up into a portentous frown. She was in mourning for her brother, but the shape and style of her garments was unchanged. The mushroom hat was devoid of ornament, and the ribbon that fastened it under her chin was black instead of blue—that was the only difference.

Treating Malahide to a stony stare, she stumped into the room, ignoring his presence, except that her first words had reference to his proposal.

"Don't listen to anything of the kind, Vicar," she snapped. "If anyone goes out to look after our poor boy it had better be a friend—not an enemy."

"Really, Miss Asquith, I am not conscious of having done anything to deserve such a description," Malahide said, trying with fair success to invest his tone with good-humoured tolerance. Mr. Osborne looked from one to the other in pained surprise, but he was too unstrung to more than stammer feebly that he was sure the offer was kindly made.

"Thank you, sir, for seeing it in that light," said Malahide with a great show of respect. "I am certain that Miss Asquith will do me the justice of withdrawing that imputation when she is in a calmer mood. This news has been so grievous and so sudden that I can well make allowance for very natural excitement."

Courteously as Malahide spoke, he was inwardly furious that this eccentric old lady should have fathomed his secret, and he chose his words with a view to goading her to exasperation. He wanted to learn how

she had discovered a sentiment that he had believed to be locked safely in his own breast. He gained his purpose, but though Aunt Rebecca was blazing with indignation at his suggestion that she was not quite herself, she refused to address him directly.

‘I know what I am talking about, Vicar,’ she said. “I have not had access to my poor brother Horace’s private diary for nothing, and glad I am that it fell into my hands before Beryl got hold of it. It would have been a thousand pities if she had found cause to despise her father’s memory because a scoundrel kept him like a toad under a harrow, and he did not know which way to turn.”

Malahide had not bargained for this. The last thing he had suspected was that Horace Asquith would have recorded in black and white the conditions he had so nearly entered into for the renewal of the mortgages. He had hoped that, with Dick out of the way once for all, he could have posed as Beryl’s friend by tearing up the securities, and that then, having won her favour, he could have

induced her to marry him. For a moment he was staggered by the discovery that this old gentlewoman, who had always despised and ignored him, had probed his designs upon the girl and regarded him as a rival of the missing man; but he grasped the necessity of keeping up appearances. It would be a false move to make any admissions, especially as Aunt Rebecca, out of regard for her dead brother's good name, evidently did not intend to enlighten Beryl. If he played his cards skilfully, he might still gain his end in the way he had settled on after Mr. Asquith's death—always provided that that scene half-way up the White Pass had terminated "satisfactorily."

"Oh! diaries are dreadful things," he laughed. "I should never have suspected my old friend Asquith of such a weakness, and I cannot take the responsibility for anything he has put in his. People write down all sorts of nonsense late at night and forget to scratch it out in the morning. However, after this I am afraid, Mr. Osborne, that there must be an end of my project. One hardly cares to

undertake a trip to Alaska with one's motives under suspicion, and I had been on the point of starting for a course of the waters at Homburg. I trust on my return thence I shall find your suspense happily ended."

With a low bow to Aunt Rebecca, and much sympathetic handshaking with the Vicar, who accompanied him to the door not knowing what to say, Malahide took his departure. The moment he was clear of the grounds he consulted his watch and began to walk hurriedly back to the Abbey, an already half-formed intention rapidly assuming shape in his mind. Hank Devine's letter to Mr. Osborne had largely discounted the pleasure which Jake Mursell's forecast had brought him, and he would have given a large sum *to be sure*. The chances were in favour of Dick having been killed, but that wall of cliff mentioned by the Vicar's correspondent seemed to stand between him and infinite possibilities. The unseen tragedy might have ended in so many ways.

"If there was a telegraph to Skagway I could wire to Mursell's mother and learn if

he has turned up," he said to himself. "But there isn't, and that leaves nothing but for me to go out. It will be quickest and best, as I saw when, on the spur of the moment, I made that quixotic offer just now. It was a happy thought, too, to tip them Homburg as a *raison d'être* for my possible absence. Yes, I will go out, and master the exact position. It is not a matter that can be left in the air."

With Rupert Malahide to decide was to act, and having clinched his determination he rapidly, as he walked along, made mental arrangements for immediate departure. The Allan boat, which would put him in touch with the Canadian Pacific Railway, was due to sail from Liverpool on the morrow, and he settled to make a strenuous effort to catch it.

"If so I shall be in Skagway in something under a month," he reflected. "Stay, though; let me calculate it exactly." And pulling a paper from his pocket, which happened to be the envelope of Jake Mursell's letter, he proceeded to jot down the number of days that



"MALAHIDE, HURRIEDLY DISPOSING OF THE ENVELOPE, ASSISTED BERYL OVER THE STILE" (p. 147).

would be required for the several stages of his journey.

For the purpose of making his reckoning he had halted at a stile that led across the Vicarage meadows, not only to his own park, but also to the Hall; and so intent was he on his task that he did not hear approaching footsteps till Beryl Asquith was close upon him. She was in deep mourning, and her sweet face showed traces of the fresh shock she had received when Mr. Osborne had rushed over to the Hall with his news—a shock all the more terrible because the same post had brought her Dick's cheery letter describing his arrival at Skagway.

Malahide, who had just completed his itinerary, looked up at last, and, hurriedly disposing of the envelope, assisted Beryl over the stile. He was far too clever to attempt to condole with her. To do so would have been impertinent, her engagement to Dick never having been made public; and it was, moreover, to his interest to ignore it. He merely remarked that it was a sad affair, that he hoped she would be able to comfort

the Vicar, whom he had just left; and then, raising his hat, he passed on.

"How her beauty grows on me!" he muttered, as he entered the Abbey park. "When I began the chase it was the estate, and a nice gentlemanly way of collaring it, that principally weighed. *Now*, I wouldn't lose the girl herself for ten Glastonford Halls."

On reaching the mansion he sent for his valet, and within ten minutes it was known from the butler's pantry to the stable-yard that the master of the Abbey was going to town by the afternoon train—on his way to Homburg. Bailiffs and gardeners and grooms were successively interviewed, and every preparation was made for a prolonged absence. There was so much to do in so short a time that Malahide did not even change the clothes he had worn in the morning before he drove to the station, and it was only when he was half-way to London that he made an important discovery. In the seclusion of his first-class carriage he was moved to consult the programme of his journey that he had

pencilled down. It was nowhere to be found. He turned his pockets inside out, but the envelope of Jake Mursell's letter with its tell-tale memoranda was missing.

"This is not like me; I hope it is not an omen of disaster!" he thought. "I must have dropped it when she came upon me so suddenly. Bah! what matters it? The office at Skagway didn't appear to possess a stamp, for the postmark was Victoria and that would not prove anything. As for my scribbled programme, I might well be expected to take an interest in the facilities for communicating with the spot where the local excitement centres, without being suspected of going there."

None the less was he annoyed with himself for his carelessness, and, though the chances were that if the envelope were ever picked up at all it would be by some yokel who could not read it, he got out at the next station and telegraphed to his house-steward to institute a search. But up to the time of his leaving London for Liverpool by the night mail no reply reached him, though he deferred his departure to the last moment.

Twenty-four hours later the good ship *Parisian* was steaming down St. George's Channel in the teeth of a south-westerly gale, and Rupert Malahide lay in his berth in the private state-room which he had secured. He was "a bad sailor," and was very sick. The crash of distant crockery, the banging of doors, the thumping of the engines, and the whirr of the screw made him curse Jake Mursell with every hard-fetched breath.

In the midst of his trouble the cabin-door, which he had left unbolted for the easier admission of the steward, was pushed open, and he sat up to resent the intrusion. But the words he was about to hurl died away on his lips at the sight of the wizened little woman's face that was peering at him from under a ribbon-tied mushroom hat—for, despite the weather, Aunt Rebecca had been on deck for a breather before retiring.

"This is the wrong cabin, Beryl," she said to someone behind, as she backed out; "and apparently it is the wrong ship, too. It seems to be bound for Homburg!"

CHAPTER IX.

A CHANGE OF FRONT.

WHEN Jake Mursell had cut the rope, he worked round, still keeping out of sight, to the rear of Dick's shelter, and, having come within ten paces, whistled softly. Dick instantly faced round and covered him with his rifle. Jake, who carried no visible firearms, smiled pleasantly.

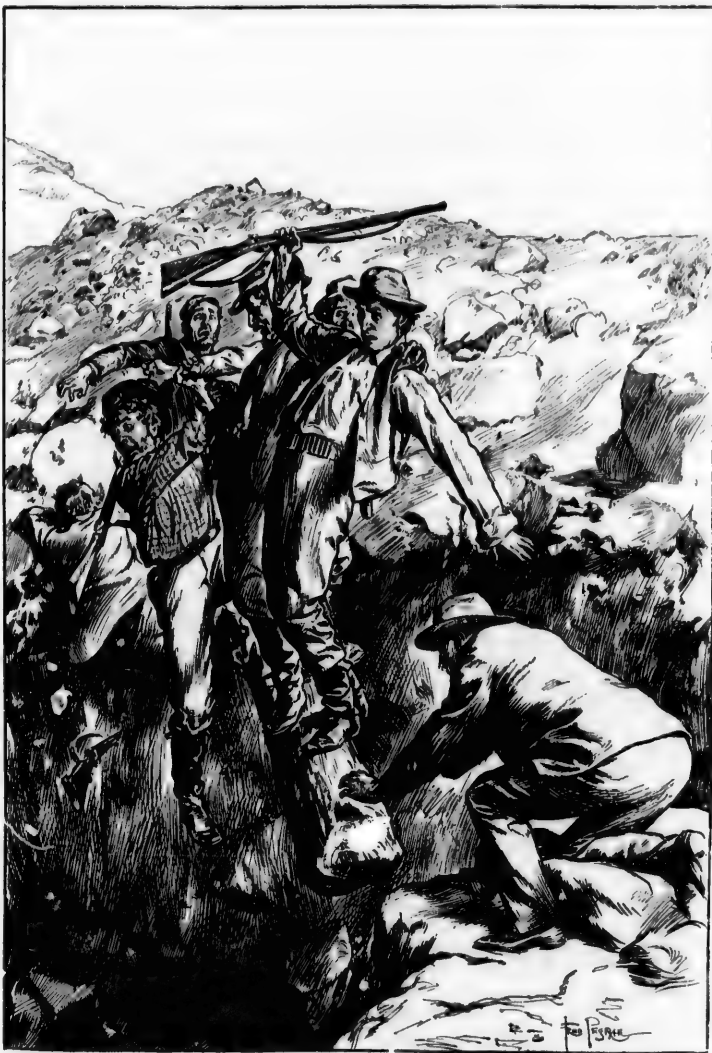
"I am a friend, Mr. Osborne; though seeing me here at such a time you might well think otherwise," he said, lowering his voice so that it should not carry to the ambush beyond the chasm. "I am about to prove it to you by making an end of your enemies. All I ask is that you will watch me—with free liberty to shoot if I play you false."

Dick's astonishment at the "salmon-packer's" appearance in the midst of the treacherous attack was intense, and keeping his Winchester levelled, he eyed him with growing distrust. "Do what you like," he said; "but if you come a step nearer I shall fire."

Jake waved his hand airily, and, taking care to observe the injunction, moved out into the broad, level space in the centre of the plateau. Dick, keen to follow his every movement, and determined to shoot him at the first proof that he was a traitor, peered round the boulder, offering a fair mark for the ambushed sharpshooters. But the firing which had ceased on Jake's first appearance on the scene, did not recommence.

Jake advanced to the edge of the narrow chasm that bounded one side of the plateau and called out "Rube!" A fierce face, framed in a shock of red hair rose above one of the rocks beyond the fissure.

"Don't waste any more powder, boys," called Jake. "I am bossing this show, and I can make terms that'll suit all parties. Come over here, the whole crowd, and talk."



"JAKE STOOPED DOWN AND CALMLY DISLODGED THE END OF THE SLENDER
BRIDGE" (p. 153).

Red Rube emerged from the pile of boulders, and, followed by five slouching ruffians, advanced towards the chasm. Dick now perceived—what had escaped his notice in the gloom of the previous evening—that it was bridged by a trunk of spruce-fir, and he was in two minds whether he ought to allow the gang to cross to his side of it. But, reflecting that he had Jake at his mercy, he held his rifle in readiness and waited.

What followed passed so quickly that he did not grasp its full significance till it was too late to interfere, had he been so minded. On reaching the trunk, Red Rube motioned to his companions to cross, and when they were all on the narrow support, joining hands and sidling along it for greater security, he himself brought up the rear. As soon as the whole six were on the trunk, and the first of the desperadoes was within a yard of him, Jake stooped down and calmly dislodged the end of the slender bridge. Carrying the first five men with it to certain death, the trunk fell into the abyss; but Red Rube, though

he dropped his rifle, managed to clutch the opposite brink, where he sprawled and struggled for vantage ground against the side of the chasm. Drawing a revolver, Jake fired two shots at him, but missed; and before he could get in a third Rube had regained the further ledge and was among the rocks.

"There, Mr. Osborne! I reckon that ought to serve as a testimonial of good faith," said Jake, coolly, when he had assured himself by a glance into the black depths that his work was well done. "I am sorry not to have raked in the biggest tough of the lot, but he won't give us any more trouble without his rifle. I'm real glad to have been of use."

For the moment Dick could not answer him. The horrible swiftness with which those five had gone down into the pit turned him faint and sick. And, though the service rendered by "Mr. Baxter" was of undoubted value, there was so much of cold-blooded treachery in the method of it that Dick had to cast about for words to express himself. There was a good deal to be explained, too,

before he could feel unreservedly grateful to this man who spoke and smiled so blandly within a minute of wiping five fellow-creatures out of the scheme of creation.

"You certainly seemed to have turned up in the nick of time," said Dick, after vainly peering into the black gulf for a trace of his late assailants. "I am curious to know how you chanced to be on hand."

The distrust in his voice was unmistakable, but Jake only laughed good-humouredly:—"There was very little chance about it, except that I happened to learn that the boys were going to lay for you on the White Pass. I had half engaged Red Rube—for the salmon fishery, you know—and the brute trusted me. As I knew it was no sort of use arguing with that crowd, I gammoned them that I had a grudge to pay off too, and so got them to take me along. You see, I'd taken a kind of fancy to you on the voyage up, and I wasn't going to let you be straightened out without having a shot at saving you."

"Well, you've done it effectually," said Dick, beginning to wonder if this was genuine.

Somehow Jake had contrived to invest it with the ring of truth.

"Yes, I'm a whale at having my own way," proceeded this good Samaritan genially. "They started a couple of hours ahead of you, and we hid up in the boulders across the chasm, but last night I persuaded them that it was too dark to shoot. Towards dawn I stole away, and over the log bridge, intending to warn you, but before I'd reached you the girl came up the rope, and shooting began. Then I got to cover, and lay cogitating how to act till one of the gang came over and cut the rope. That let the light of day into my thinking-machine. I knew that having stalled off your white friend from coming back they would run in on you in a minute or two, so I decided to try a bluff. You will allow that it met with considerable success."

This sounded plausible, and had the merit of fitting in with all that Dick had seen and heard. Ten steps brought him to the edge of the precipice, and there, sure enough, he beheld apparent confirmation of at least part

of the story. The rope was cut short off, and far down the canyon Hank Devine's broad back was visible for an instant before he disappeared with the burden of the wounded girl on his way back to Skagway. Dick felt that to doubt, or at any rate to show doubt, longer, would be churlish, and he frankly offered "Mr. Baxter" his thanks.

"I wish it could have been done with less wholesale slaughter," said Jake, divining his thoughts, "but we were in a tight place, and there was no time for shilly-shally. I am glad I hadn't longer to think about it, because self-interest is strong, and this little turn-up has about queered my business in these parts, I reckon. Red Rube will make this region too warm for me to hope for a quiet life at fish-packing. What are your plans, may I ask, before I offer a suggestion?"

Dick looked round rather ruefully. There lay one of his Indian carriers stone-dead in a pool of blood, with his load, which he had been in the act of lifting when shot, scattered around. It was true that one was left, smoking imperturbably in his blanket now

that the danger was past; but Hank Devine, whom he had regarded as his mainstay, had deserted him, and away in front stretched the lonely track to the summit of the Pass as an earnest of the difficulties to be faced unaided if he elected to go on. Hank's absence, he readily admitted, was pardonable under the circumstances, and was probably only temporary; but it would be galling either to have to wait or go back for him, when every hour of the short summer might be wanted for his work in the vast solitudes that lay behind the mountain.

"I am for pushing forward if it is practicable," replied Dick, with a wistful look at his surviving carrier. "See here, you chap, you speak English enough to understand," he went on, going up to the quaintly huddled figure. "Good! Then can you help build a canoe and paddle it afterwards?"

"Me Siwash feller—do anyting for dollars—build um boat and paddl' um. Know ribber a heap!" was the reply that gladdened Dick's heart.

"I shall go straight on," he said; and then, perceiving his selfishness, he added, "but I

can't leave you here to find your way down these precipices back to Skagway alone. I must——"

"There is no 'must' about it," interrupted Jake. "Your fix brings me to my suggestion. If you'll have me, I'll go on with you. Salmon-canning is at a discount for me hereabouts now, and I have often wanted to nose round the Yukon. You and me can make shift to carry the dead Indian's load down to the lake, and then we can prove this joker's title to be considered a skilled navigator."

Probably if Dick had had a free choice, this oily-mannered individual, who could kill ruthlessly with a smile on his lips, would have been the last whom he would have selected for a companion. But in the opposite balance there weighed the chivalrous feeling that "Mr. Baxter" had marred his business prospects through coming to his aid, and that he owed him some reparation. His answer, therefore, was an unhesitating assent.

"Come by all means, if you don't mind roughing it," he said. "When Devine catches us up there won't be such a great lot to carry,

divided among three. He is sure to follow, if I am not mistaken in him, and I propose to nail a paper on that tree, saying that we have gone on, and asking him to hurry up."

Jake nodded aproval. "A good notion," he replied; "and while you are writing your message I will bury the dead carrier. Might jar on people's nerves if we left corpses about." And before Dick had grasped his intention, he had dragged the body to the brink of the crevasse and hurled it into the abyss which had swallowed the five victims of his ruse. Again Dick could not repress a shudder at the man's callousness; though when he came to analyse the sentiment, he had to admit that his new companion had only taken a common-sense way out of the difficulty.

The note to Devine was soon written, and when it had been fixed to the tree, from which a few feet of cut rope still dangled, preparations were made for an immediate start. A hasty meal was eaten, the loads were apportioned and the Siwash Indian was ordered to lead them over the summit by the shortest trail to Lake Taku.

The procession of three, marching in single file, had reached the upper end of the plateau, and were debouching on to the rocky causeway that led to the higher levels, when Jake uttered a sudden exclamation—

"I have left my knife," he said, in answer to Dick's inquiry. "You keep right on, and I will overtake you in the whisk of a mare's tail. That knife was a present from my dear old mother in Boston for attending Sunday-school, and I wouldn't lose it for a lot!"

Depositing his load he hurried back to the plateau, and, not without uneasy glances towards the boulders where Red Rube had disappeared, he found his knife where he had placed it—close to the trunk that overhung the canyon. For half a minute more he lingered on the spot, and then hastened after the others.

But when, five minutes later, he rejoined them, a traveller ascending the precipice from the canyon would have seen no signs of the spot of white on the tree trunk, which, before Jake's return, would have caught his eye.

CHAPTER X.

OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

THE busy ring of iron against wood echoed along the shore of the Taku Lake. The rain came down in torrents, and reeked back from the sodden earth in a ground fog that was almost thick enough to break the fall of the rain that bred it. A coil of blue smoke from a camp fire in a belt of larches struggled upwards, and then, having topped the trees beat down again, unable to rise higher in the damp air, to fill the grove with pungent fragrance. Mosquitoes, nearly as big as humming-birds, buzzed about in search of prey and found it—in the broad cheeks of Jake Mursell.

Jake was engaged in the none too easy task of keeping alight the spluttering fire,

and in stirring the savoury contents of the iron pot that swung over it. Some twenty yards away Dick was felling a tree, while on the other side of the glade the Indian carrier, Joey, was plying his adze on a half-finished canoe.

The party had surmounted the remainder of the White Pass without further adventure, but, though they had now been camped three days on the shore of the lake, Hank Devine had failed to put in an appearance. Dick, while regretting his absence, tried to solace himself with the reflection that, if he had really left him to his fate, the young miner was not the man he had taken him for, and would not be missed in the end. Joey, too, was proving such an efficient boat-builder that Dick's hopes of the success of his enterprise were hourly rising higher.

The one point that troubled him, since Hank's desertion seemed to be an accomplished fact, was that his late companion might, either in good faith or to excuse himself, have sent home disquieting news to his father. Once or twice he even thought of

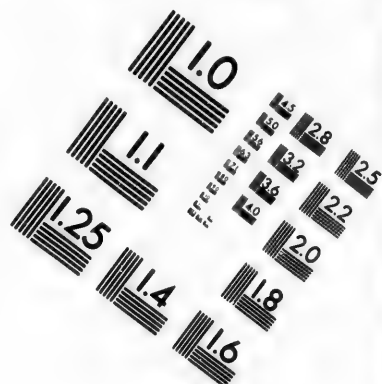
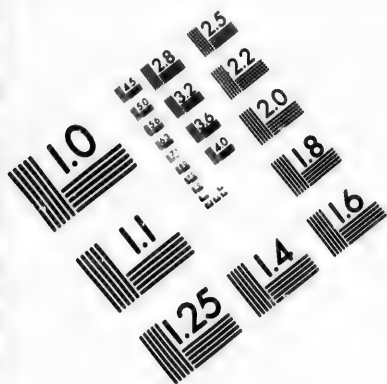
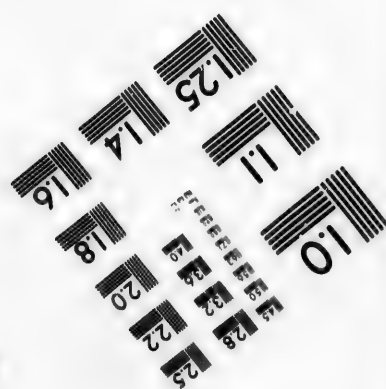
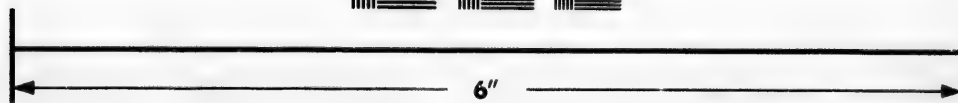
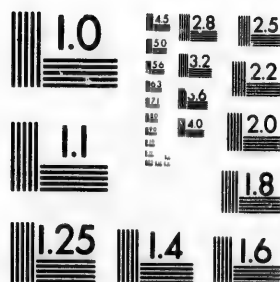


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going back to Skagway to correct such a contingency, but he refrained, in the firm conviction that, if not Hank Devine, *someone* would have gone up to the plateau to investigate the report of the fight, and that his note saying that he had gone on would have been found. Still, the possibility of a miscarriage caused him a good many uneasy qualms.

In first-rate training though he was, the wielding of the axe in that moist, steamy air made him hot, and presently he unloosed the band of his rough Norfolk jacket. Trivial as was the action, it did not escape the twinkling eyes of Jake, who from that moment paid a diminished attention to his stoking and cooking. The absent tenant of the Clifford's Inn cock-loft seemed to take quite an affectionate interest in the stalwart young Englishman's labours, and soon he got a chance to show his sympathy in a practical way.

"Phew!" exclaimed Dick, after a dozen more strokes with the axe, "I shall have to take my coat off to it after all. It doesn't much matter; I am wet to the skin as it is."

And divesting himself of his jacket, he tossed it aside.

Jake rose instantly and went and picked the dripping garment up.

"You'd better let me dry it at the fire for you," he said. "I dare say I shan't make much of a job of it, but at any rate it won't get any wetter."

"Thanks, Baxter; that is thoughtful of you," said Dick, and he watched his companion fight his way back to the fire, through the mosquitoes, with a friendly smile. He was beginning, almost against his will, to like Hank Devine's substitute. While contriving to do all the lighter share of the work, Jake had been so uniformly good-humoured and obliging in small matters such as this, that that treacherous push of his to the trunk bridge over the chasm was in a fair way to be condoned.

Jake propped the coat in front of the fitful fire, and Dick resumed his work. The unceasing rain plashed down, and the industrious Joey, scarcely visible in the mist, plied his adze. Lazily stirred by the dying

remnant of some Pacific storm that had managed to top the Chilkat range, the waters of the lake lapped the shore at the lower end of the clearing. Jake fed the fire with a few of Joey's shavings, stirred the pot a little, and then interested himself in Dick's work again.

The axe, wielded by arms which had pulled stroke in an Oxford eight, made good play, and the wielder was far too absorbed in the widening gap in the trunk to have eyes for what was going on at the fire. Having assured himself of this, Jake began to be very solicitous that the coat should have the full benefit of the meagre fire. He stooped over it and rearranged it, and in so doing it was but natural that his fingers should busy themselves in the region of the pockets. Perhaps the sodden garment was not drying quickly enough to please him, for a shade of disappointment flitted over his broad features as he gave a final touch to its folds.

While engaged on this act of benevolence his eyes wandered incessantly from the coat to Dick and back again, so that he failed to observe the approach of a stranger—a

stranger who, perceiving his occupation, had halted involuntarily some twenty paces off on his way up from the lake shore. A student of character would have been puzzled to account for the expression on the new-comer's face as he stood and watched the manœuvres at the fire. It was as though Jake Mursell's manipulation of the old Norfolk jacket recalled to the mind of the watcher an unpleasant memory, which affected him more than the scene he was actually regarding.

Not till Jake had betaken himself to the cooking-pot once more did the silent observer move forward, and then it was not to the tender of the fire that he made his way. Catching sight of Dick among the trees, he crossed the glade in ten seconds, and, coming up from behind, grasped the handle of the axe as it was poising for a stroke. Dick faced round, stared, and then seized the practical joker by the hand.

"What! Fenton, old man!" he gasped, wondering if this roughly-clad, unkempt apparition could really be the once spick-and-span chum of his undergraduate days.

"Fenton Gartside—*voyageur*, Indian trader, and concentrated essence of Mayne Reid and Fenimore Cooper's heroes—very much at your service," was the reply. "Seriously, though, Dick, you have been a deuce of a while on the way. I have been keeping an open eye for you on the Yukon, Pelly, and Lewis rivers any time this six months."

For a moment Dick's mystification was complete, and then the truth broke in upon him.

"You are the Englishman who helped to bring Ned Shrimpton out of the country? Ned told you that he knew me?" he said.

"Shrimpton—the White Ghost he was called up yonder—told someone who told me that he was interested in you," replied Gartside. "The poor chap is dead, eh?"

"He is dead, and he left me the legacy of the secret which brings me here. Perhaps you know it?" said Dick, looking at Gartside with a mistrust which he could not wholly hide as he remembered Hank Devine's story of the Englishman who had bragged in his cups of the millions at his disposal.

Gartside flushed slightly as he noted his old friend's look, and shifted his eyes uneasily to the squatting figure by the fire. Jake was stirring the *pot-au-feu* sedulously, but nothing had escaped him since he had seen the unknown stranger cross the glade and arrest Dick's axe. Jake was watching and waiting with straining ears, but Gartside lowered his voice as he replied—

"I know that he *cache'd* a pile of gold; I don't know the place, though. Is that chap a pal?" he added, with a jerk of his finger towards the fire.

"I hope so," said Dick. "He is going up to the Yukon with me, anyway, for want of a better. I didn't take to him at first, but he stood by me in some trouble I had with the toughs of Skagway, and last night I told him what I had come out for."

"You didn't give him the particulars of Shrimpton's *cachet*, surely?" said Gartside rather anxiously.

"No, indeed; I wouldn't tempt my best friend with that knowledge," replied Dick, scanning Gartside's mobile face closely. "And

now, Fenton, old chap, as you know as much of my project as I do myself, say how it goes with you. You are the last man in the world whom I should have expected to find in these wilds, and alone."

"I am not alone," said Gartside. "See, here come my good friends, Blue Lightning and Star Eyes."

And pointing down the glade towards the lake shore he drew Dick's attention to the advancing forms of the old chief and his daughter. It being summer, Star Eyes had discarded her furs for a tunic of beautifully-dressed doe-skin, and her glossy black hair was crowned with a chaplet of eagle plumes; her only tribute to civilisation being the short skirt of rough blue serge which covered her lower limbs.

"Your wife?" asked Dick.

"She would be, but I am not good enough," returned Gartside with a tinge of bitterness; and as the Indians were still some way off, he proceeded briefly to say how he had left England a broken man, and, after many wanderings in the frontier towns of the

North-West, had allied himself to Blue Lightning, who, formerly a warrior, had lived as a hunter and fisherman since the dispersal of his tribe in one of the American border wars.

"The life of the wilderness has a fascination for me; it is safer for one of my temperament," he added with a sharp little laugh. "I didn't know Blue Lightning had a daughter when I chummed in with him first, or I might have jibbed at the prospect of a lady in the show. Then this girl turned up from the Red River Mission—quixotic idea of converting the old man, you see—and I tumbled head over ears after a week. But she won't have anything of that sort to say to a precious bad lot like me. Star Eyes, Blue Lightning," he added, as the pair drew near, "this is Mr. Osborne, going down river after the White Ghost's *cachet*."

Blue Lightning merely grunted, casting unabashed glances at the pot which the watchful Jake was stirring, but Star Eyes extended her hand frankly. Yet there was a troubled look in her eyes, and she seemed

to Dick to be searching Gartside's face for some emotion which she did not find.

"There is hard work before you—if you do not know our rivers. Are you not afraid of the Rapids, the Miles Canyon, and the White Horse?" she said with a faint smile that increased Dick's impression of her uneasiness.

What could be the mystery that kept his once familiar friend from looking him squarely in the face, and that made this beautiful anomaly regard her white lover with questioning anxiety?

Dick disclaimed any dread of the Rapids, and pointed out the industrious Joey—who had stoically ignored the presence of the new arrivals—as his pilot. For the first time Blue Lightning put himself in evidence with a low guttural laugh.

"What are you chuckling at, old un?" said Gartside, recovering something of his old manner now that attention was withdrawn from himself.

"Him Siwash Injun—coast feller, no use for Rapids. Swamp um boat—all go drown,"

was Blue Lightning's contemptuous summary of Dick's most useful *aide-de-camp*.

"We must take our chance of that. I am not exactly a fool in a boat myself," said Dick, wondering what the quick telegraph which he intercepted between Gartside and Star Eyes meant.

It was only a glance which, after catching her lover's eye, the girl shot from herself to her father, and thence vaguely to the lake—anywhere in the far north—but it was answered by an almost imperceptible motion of Gartside's head. Still Jake watched unceasingly from the fire, and he chose this point to send his cheery tones ringing across the glade.

"Grub's ready, Mr. Osborne," he sang out. "Plenty for all, if those are friends of yours."

As a matter of course, the invitation was given and accepted; and, as the downpour had now ceased, the party was able to do justice to the meal in some degree of comfort. Jake was all facetious eagerness that the strangers should praise his cooking, and showed neither by word nor sign that he had already

"placed" Gartside as the drunken Englishman, of whose confirmation of the genuineness of their quest to Hank Devine Dick had informed him when more fully confiding the nature of their enterprise.

For some time the talk ran on the reason for the presence of the strangely assorted trio on the Taku Lake. It seemed that having lost a box of ammunition overboard, they had run short of cartridges, and were on their way back to Skagway to replenish their stock. They had made the passage of the lakes in a light canoe, portaging past the Rapids, and had left their heavy scow at the junction of the Lewis and Pelly rivers.

"It is a pity you were not a week earlier," said Dick, thinking of the scorn in which poor Joey was held by these river folk. "We might have all gone down stream together, and I could have availed myself of your experience. As it is, I have half a mind to wait till you have been to Skagway and returned."

"That would make us rather late. You must remember that we must be clear of the

country before winter sets in," said Jake, so hastily that Gartside fell to studying him closely.

There was something incongruous in this fat, pre-eminently "soft" man, who was evidently the drone of the party, wanting to dispense with skilled assistance when the chance occurred. Star Eyes also turned her large black orbs on "Mr. Baxter" inquiringly. So far she had been shyly observant, but now she spoke in a low, earnest voice that made Jake in turn eye her askance.

"You had better let us guide you, Mr. Osborne," she said. "Those rapids are terrible, but my father will take you through safely. There is no more clever boatman on the rivers. You have plenty of Winchester cartridges in your outfit? Good! Then you could lend us some instead of our going to Skagway, only——" and she paused and looked irresolutely at Gartside.

"Only there wouldn't be room in your canoe for all of us," said Dick, noticing her look and possibly misunderstanding the cause of her hesitation. "Well, that is easily got

over. Let one of us go back—you, Baxter, I dare say, are tired already, and will jump at the chance. I shall be only too glad for someone to go back, so that my people in England can be advised of my safety after that scrimmage."

But Jake failed to see it in that light at all. For the first time in Dick's short acquaintance with him he showed visible agitation by breaking out into perspiration and mopping his broad face.

"I don't think that's quite fair," he said, with a tremble in his usually unctuous tones. "I stood by you on the Pass, Mr. Osborne, and I'm here more for my own safety from Red Rube than gain, but having come so far I am keen to do a bit of prospecting up yonder—quite apart from your venture."

"That settles it, of course," said Dick. "We will go on, then, and do the best we can with Joey."

But it appeared that Star Eyes was again ready with a proposal. This resourceful maiden, with the manners of a gentiewoman and in the garb of a savage, was beginning

to impress Dick with the notion that, quietly and firmly, she ruled her companions.

"I see a better plan than that," she said. "Mr. Gartside can go over the Pass into Skagway and write a letter to your friends. Then there won't be any waiting. The rest of us can start at once down stream in our canoe."

Gartside regarded the speaker with such a comical expression of dismay that Dick remembered it some time afterwards when striving for a solution to his old friend's conduct. For the present he took it as a more or less humorous exaggeration—especially as the next moment Gartside willingly, almost eagerly, fell in with the suggestion.

"Two months in Skagway—it will mean that at least, if I am to wait your return—is no great catch," he said. "But never mind! I'll do that little lot on my head, as they say in the police-courts, and glad to do it, old Dick, if it will simplify matters for you. I'll start in an hour, and as I have no load I should be in the settlement in two

days—tossing the boys for drinks in Mother Mursell's," he added with a strangely defiant look at Star Eyes, who winced at the allusion, but made no comment.

That there was a mystery here, to which he held no clue, Dick felt a growing conviction, but as his journey would be hurried on by the new arrangement, Joey's boat being only half finished, he accepted Gartside's offer, and thanked him for it in a little speech, which, he could not disguise from himself, sounded formal. The motion, however, was not to be carried without dissentients. Blue Lightning, who had eaten to repletion without a word, and was now smoking with his back to a tree, said suddenly:

"You no play 'possum, you Gar'side? You no go 'cross big water to England and no come back?"

"Never fear, old gentleman," was the reassuring reply. "You'll find me in Skagway safe enough when you've made the trip. I'm too fond of you to give you the slip like that."

And presently Jake showed himself not

altogether pleased with the new arrangement. Taking advantage of a conference that Star Eyes was holding with her would-be lover he drew Dick aside.

"Is this quite wise, Mr. Osborne?" he said with a deprecating glance at the pair. "Your friend is all right, no doubt—he seems to be acting quite the gentleman—but we don't know much about these Indians, do we?"

"Well, for the matter of that, I know pretty nearly as much of them as I do of you, or of Joey," replied Dick decisively. "Anyway, they are going to guide us, so there is no need to debate the question."

Jake retired with the virtuous air of a man who has met with a rebuff in trying to do his duty, and the revised programme encountered no further opposition. Time being of paramount value, with winter getting ready to swoop from its northern fastnesses, it was decided to take advantage of the remaining hours of daylight. Dick's outfit was carried down to the shore to be packed in Blue Lightning's canoe; Joey regretfully

abandoned his half-built boat; and Gartside, after shaking hands all round, struck out of the glade on his solitary tramp towards the Pass. Dick was more and more puzzled by his old friend's manner. He seemed to have dropped the nervous shyness that had marked their first meeting, and his farewells were flippant.

"He can't care much for the girl, or he would not be in such a hurry to leave her," Dick thought, as he glanced sympathetically at Star Eyes, who, statuesque and silent, watched Gartside's slight form receding amidst the trees.

But Jake Mursell was not satisfied with the handshake and the advice "not to work too hard" which Gartside had accorded him. While the rest were busy stowing the outfit in the canoe, he muttered something about his "dear old mother's knife" and sped back to the camping ground—thence through the belt of spruces, and overtook the solitary traveller.

"Say!" he panted, affecting unnatural Americanisms; "I jest come after to warn

you. He's the softest kind of tender-foot, your friend Osborne, and I'll bet he forgot it. Don't you go for to let on to a living man in Skagway that you've met him above ground or there'll be trouble. There's a sight of Red Rube's pals left there, and mebbe Rube himself has crawled home. They're the sort to follow us and get square—see?"

"Yes," said Gartside, measuring him with a critical eye; "I've been out here a year or two, and I don't think I'm likely to make the mistake of blabbing. It was wise of you to post me, though. Anything else?"

"N-no, I guess not," returned Jake, making as though to hurry back to the canoe, and then checking himself, and adding when he had retreated a few steps:

"*He* wouldn't ever ask you—for old acquaintance, mebbe; but, say, Mister—you've been up yonder; it would save a heap of trouble. We're on a blind trail, ain't we? That *cachet* has been cleaned out already?"

Gartside's usually quizzical eyes blazed into quick anger. "Not by me, if that's what

you mean to hint," he flung back. "I've more than a mind to drop you, you fat beast, for suggesting such a thing." And then with a jeering laugh he put up the revolver which he had half drawn, for Jake had turned tail and was speeding for the lake shore.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WHITE GHOST'S *CACHET*.

THROUGHOUT the voyage over the confluent lakes and streams which, finally uniting at the fork of the Lewis and Pelly rivers, constitute the headwaters of the Yukon, the cause of the greatest wonder to Dick was Blue Lightning's dignity. It prevailed, no matter what attitude of body or perplexity of mind the immediate situation demanded. In the mad whirl between the rocky walls of the Miles River Canyon, and amid the seething turmoil of White Horse Rapids, the chief's stoical calm never failed him; and Dick valued the quality the more because every mile of the journey proved that he could not have done without it. At the most critical junctures his own poor Siwash—Joey the

indefatigable—was quaking with fear at the bottom of the canoe.

And now, three weeks after leaving the shores of the Taku Lake, when the light canoe had five days previously been discarded for the roofed scow, Blue Lightning was more dignified than ever. In the larger vessel and on the broader bosom of the main stream, there was greater scope for Joey's labour, properly supervised. The ex-warrior contrived to get the best part of the work out of "the Siwash feller," contenting himself with keeping a watchful eye and an ever-ready pole for the more dangerous rocks and currents.

So it was that on a certain morning when the scow was floating down stream at a steady twelve miles an hour, Blue Lightning waved the humbler red man aside and took sole charge of the navigation. Recently their course had lain between terraced banks of conifers, but now on the right the shore flattened out and vegetation ceased, the configuration of the ground suggesting the dwindling apex of a watershed. And so it

proved, for with a few skilful twirls with his pole Blue Lightning brought the scow under the bank fifty yards above the confluence of the Yukon with a smaller river which he had indicated with one of his stately gestures to Dick.

"*That Klondyke*," he said gravely, little guessing with all his air of impenetrable wisdom that those two words in less than a twelvemonth would sum up the earthly goal of a mighty multitude.

Dick, who had been leaning against the thatched superstructure smoking with Jake Mursell, sprang forward eagerly. Jake's geniality and good humour had tarnished somehow under the stress of the voyage, and he had not been such good company of late, but he appeared to wake up at the sight of his companion's enthusiasm and stuck closely to him.

"The Klondyke!" he said. "So this is the locality you have been keeping so dark! What is it—a mountain, or a river, or a blessed mirage? Not that it matters much to me. I can find that I wasn't built for

wear-and-tear, and all the gold in creation wouldn't tempt me to use this desert a day after you've done with it."

Star Eyes, either attracted by their voices or by the stopping of the boat, had come out of the deck-house, and stood watching the two white men as they joined her father. Daily winning Dick's admiration by her courage during the perilous passage of the Rapids and the rock-studded stream, the girl had, nevertheless, been taciturn and uncommunicative, especially on all matters relating to Gartside. She had shown, indeed, more inclination towards the "Mr. Baxter" of the party, favouring that worthy with the best blankets and studying his tastes in the simple cuisine that was alone possible on the scow. This preference was the more marked because Jake treated her and her father with undisguised dislike, and privately to Dick professed to regard them both with suspicion.

"We shall have to watch those copper-coloured beggars, Mr. Osborne, when we come to the neighbourhood of the *cachet*," he had said more than once during the voyage. "They

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look to me to be capable of lifting the plunder and leaving us in the lurch."

Though Dick did not share this view, Gartside's manner had imbued him with a certain vague uneasiness which could only be allayed by finding Shrimpton's hoard intact. Hence Blue Lightning's announcement that the region of the *cachet* had been reached kindled him into unguarded enthusiasm.

"Yes, the Klondyke is the river my instructions told me to make for," he cried in answer to Jake's question. "We shall know the best, or the worst, now in a few hours. I have a plan, with compass bearings, that ought to lead me straight to the place, and I shall have to consult it before we decide on the next step."

Now this was the first allusion that Dick had made in Jake's presence, so far as he knew, to the possession of a plan. To Blue Lightning, as navigator, he had necessarily named the Klondyke broadly as their destination, with an injunction to that silent Indian, rigidly observed, to keep his own counsel. Without actually mistrusting Jake,

he had thought it wiser to preserve him from temptation by concealing the existence of the plan, and therefore he regretted his present revelation the moment it was beyond his lips.

"That's good hearing—that you've got a pocket guide-book of the locality," said Jake carelessly. "It ought to shorten the trip and get us back to civilisation sooner."

All this time Blue Lightning had been keeping the scow with her broad bow butted into the bank, but the Yukon runs like a mill-race, and the stream was tugging and tearing at her stern with a violence that threatened to send her whirling off shore. Though the old man waited impassively for instructions, the sinews straining in his bronzed arms as he threw all his weight on the pole were eloquent for the necessity for instant decision. Star Eyes flashed a keen understanding of Dick's dilemma from her place in the doorway, but spoke no word.

In the meantime Dick was thinking rapidly. After all, the main object of his secrecy had, he reflected, been attained. From his previous study of the plan he knew that he was

within a dozen miles of Shrimpton's *cachet*, and that all he desired was to come to it without risk of any of the party breaking away and forestalling him. There was now, he argued, in the short interval of time and space that lay between him and his promised land, no further danger of such bad faith being successful, even if attempted, and he decided to produce and consult the plan.

He had kept it for greater security in its original casing of deer-skin, fastened round his neck under his clothes, so that it never left his person, waking or sleeping. Even in that society—of three Indians and a casual white acquaintance—he felt what Vick Mursell would have called “real mean” in having to own thus publicly to the distrust which his concealment implied, but there was no help for it. Plunging his hand beneath his vest he brought out the package which he had last examined at “Mother Mursell’s” at Skagway, and unfolded the covering.

The contents proved to be nothing but a piece of blank cardboard of the exact size and shape of the cabinet photograph on the

back of which Ned Shrimpton's rough but effective plan had been drawn.

Men express themselves in different ways when placed in a tight corner. It is a matter of health and temperament. Some swear; some weep; and some sulk. Dick Osborne simply burst into laughter, in which there was no tinge of hysteria, at the thought that he had endured so much and won so close to his goal only to lose the prize at last.

But his merriment was short-lived, as there followed the quick inrush of appreciation of what his loss meant to him. Had it been merely material he might have laughed on, but the gold which was now beyond his power meant Beryl Asquith, and the thought sobered him. Without disclosing his discovery he postponed speculation and flung himself into present requirements, the chief of which was to relieve the tension on Blue Lightning's brawny arms.

"We must land hereabouts," he said curtly, for he did not know whether the thief was among his hearers. "Which is best, Blue Lightning—to pull her round and punt up

the Klondyke, or moor her here to the bank of the big river?"

"No place stay here—water too strong," was the reply. "Up Klondyke plenty creek. Me go?"

Dick nodded assent, and for the next three hours had little chance to review the situation. Yielded once more to the mastering current, the clumsy vessel plunged onward to the confluence with the smaller river, to stem the torrent of which up stream it took the united efforts of the chief, of Joey, and of Dick himself. At length, some five miles below the creek known as "Bonanza," they came to an indent in the bank which offered a safe haven for the scow; the outfit was carried ashore; and Dick was again confronted with the problem of whether to confess at once the failure of the expedition. One thing he was very certain of—he would take good care that none of his companions left his sight so long as they were in that district. If he had to return empty-handed, every man and woman of the party should return as empty-handed as he.

It was Jake Mursell who, wittingly or otherwise, brought matters to a crisis and spoke the word which forced Dick to state his position. Since that wild burst of laughter an atmosphere of electrical tension seemed to have gripped the whole party; hardly a word had been spoken; and mutual distrust was on every face but that of Jake, who had assumed a demeanour of benevolent surprise at the moodiness of his companions. As usual, he had shirked the hard work of the punt poles coming up stream, but now he busied himself in the milder labour of collecting drift-wood for a fire.

"What's the good of doing that?" blurted out Dick, irritably suspicious now of every motive. "Who said we were going to camp here?"

"Well, I surmised as much—after all that toil," returned Jake pleasantly. "You see, I am not in your confidence as to the location of the Eldorado. Mayhap it is near enough for us to be pushing on to it to-day?"

Dick hurled out a mighty oath in which all the pent-up wrath of the last few hours

found vent. "I have been robbed," he added in explanation, "robbed of the plan by which alone I can find the place. I had it at Skagway; I don't accuse anyone here; but this I know—that none of us will part company for five minutes so long as we are on the Klondyke. It is a forlorn hope, but I propose to stay and grub about these parts on the off-chance of hitting the spot."

After the manner of their race, the Indians had taken the first opportunity of squatting on the ground, the father and daughter a little apart from Joey the carrier. The latter, with the less phlegmatic temperament of the coast-wise aboriginal, grinned at the raised voices of the palefaces, anticipating the pleasure of seeing a fight. Blue Lightning smoked on with unruffled dignity, but under his blanket his right hand gave a loosening twitch to the knife in his belt, and his grim visage was frozen into an alertness that was more for Jake Mursell than for Dick. Star Eyes rose slowly to her feet and came forward.

"I am sorry that you have been robbed, Mr. Osborne," she said. "It must make you

think that we who have come with you are bad people—or some of us. But I can restore to you the map of the gold *cachet*—not indeed the one made by the White Ghost, which has been stolen, but a copy of it which was drawn by Mr. Gartside while that poor man lay sick in our scow.”

And thrusting her hand into her bosom she brought forth a folded paper and gave it to Dick.

For a moment the reaction was so great that he had no thought for anything but the material object which bade fair to end his trouble, and he clutched the paper eagerly, opening it and perceiving from his recollection of the original that it was likely to be of service. The key of the situation was a bluff, visible at a point five miles up the Klondyke, three miles due north from the left bank. So much he remembered, but the information was useless without the compass bearings of certain trees on the summit, and two imaginary lines drawn at indicated angles for giving distances from the last of the trees to a stone beneath which the gold was hidden. A glance

showed Dick that the bearings, angles, and distances were pencilled on Gartside's copy with a precision that spoke for their correctness.

Honestly glad that the beautiful Indian girl standing modestly before him had acquitted herself of the theft by producing a substitute of the stolen plan, Dick was beginning to overwhelm her with thanks when his attention was drawn by Jake Mursell's heavy breathing. Turning quickly, he saw that the man's face had gone purple, and that he had every symptom of apoplexy.

"What's the matter, Baxter—are you ill?" said Dick.

With an effort Jake controlled himself, and, licking his dried lips, forced himself to speech. "I might well be," he said viciously. "Don't you see that this lays me open to the suspicion of having stolen your precious plan—that if this virtuous pair are innocent, it must be either me or Joey the carrier? It's hard, I reckon, for a man to have a charge like that brought against him."

"No one has brought any charge against you," replied Dick rather coldly, for he quite

felt the force of the argument. "I'm a lawyer, you must remember, and I shouldn't dream of making an accusation as unbacked by proof as that would be."

"That's a grudging answer," said Jake, turning away and affecting sulkiness, though not dissatisfied with the ready reason that his quick wit had furnished for the sudden access of rage.

It was now late in the evening, and though in those northern latitudes the short summer is marked by almost continuous daylight, Dick decided to curb his impetuosity and let the party rest after the hard work up stream. So far as he could roughly estimate from the plan, Shrimpton's hiding-place would be found some five miles or so from where they were; and allowing for the rugged aspect of the country and time for the necessary calculations, they should be able to reach it in as many hours after making a start.

Naturally, Dick wondered how Gartside had come to make a copy of the plan, but Star Eyes offered no explanation, and a feeling of delicacy prevented Dick from questioning her. With

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the air of having discharged a perfunctory task she relapsed into an unsympathetic silence, and went about preparing the evening meal as though the occupation were a relief to her. On the contrary, Jake had apparently recovered his equanimity, for before sitting down he apologised for his outburst, and made a jest at his own squeamishness. He did not, however, remain long at the camp fire, but retired to the scow to sleep, saying that he was tired. Joey, too, soon curled up under the lee of a rock and slept.

All Dick's latent antipathy to Jake having returned tenfold, he felt disinclined to spend the hours of rest in his vicinity, so he lay down on the bank, covering himself with his blanket, and first taking the precaution to put the copy of the plan in one of his boots.

Blue Lightning and Star Eyes also showed a preference for the shore, the former deftly building a shelter for his daughter with skins which he brought from the scow. Throughout the recent excitement the chief had evinced no emotion or curiosity, but when he came to select the site for the little lodge he cast a crafty eye

over the situation. The scow was moored off a miniature gully, in which they had camped, and Blue Lightning pitched his daughter's tent towards the narrowing upper end of it, furthest from the shore, so that in a strategic sense the shelter commanded the exit into the open country. When Star Eyes had retired to the interior he stretched himself across the entrance and, save for the hum of the mosquitos and the snoring of Joey, all was still.

Thus an hour passed, and then a black shadow sped up the gully from the river in the twilight—a shadow which Blue Lightning, sitting up alert and watchful the moment it had flitted by, recognised as the "Baxter" of the expedition, heavily laden. The Indian stretched out his hand and touched his daughter's foot.

"Bad man gone after White Ghost's gold," he whispered. "Take all um things—make big skedaddle. Me follow and kill, or wake up White Chief Osborne?"

"Do nothing, my father," floated back the soft reply. "And say nothing in the morning. Baxter will return on his own tracks."

And while the camp still slumbered the

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prediction was verified, for Jake stole back to the scow, still heavily laden, and, as the ever-wakeful Blue Lightning perceived, drawn and haggard of countenance.

Jake's broad face still showed traces of a great fatigue, or of a great shock, when the camp was roused by Dick, who, after the physical labour and mental agitation of the previous day, had slept a good deal longer than he had intended.

Having drawn the scow further into the inlet, the party started, and struck into a country of dreary moss-covered hummocks, alternated with clumps of spruce firs, till they sighted the bluff. It was not a steep climb to the summit, nor was the hill a lofty one, but the usually light springy step of Star Eyes lagged somewhat as she followed the men on to the level top.

Then Dick busied himself with his compass and the copied plan, Jake proffering superfluous assistance, till the last of the indicated pine trees was located and they set themselves to measure distances. True to the forecast of the paper which Dick clutched in

his trembling fingers, the measuring tape led him to a flat slag of rock.

"Here you are!" cried Dick, losing control of himself in the mad abandon of victory; "here is the place! Blessed if I don't give you a ten thousand pound wedding-present, Miss Star Eyes, when you marry good old Fenton Gartside!"

And stooping down he wrenched up the slag of rock, disclosing a hollow basin in the earth that had been plainly scooped by human hands. It was empty! There was room in the vacuum for untold gold, but the gold was not there!

CHAPTER XII.

CROSS CURRENTS.

"TIDE's agin her, I reckon."

"Her ingines want ile, mebbe."

The speakers were Vick Mursell and Hank Devine, who from the rickety timber staging of the wharf were watching the approach of an incoming steamer. The vessel had rounded into the Skagway river from the Lynn Channel half an hour before, and was laboriously churning the brown flood-water that had come down from the mountains. She had already been recognised as the obsolete old paddle-boat, clumsy as a Dutch galleon, which was thought good enough to carry mails and passengers from Seattle and Victoria along the coast to Juneau and the ports further north.

Vick Mursell wore her arm in a sling, though over seven weeks had passed since her gallant attempt to warn her lover and his English patron of the ambush awaiting them in the White Pass. Fever had followed as a result of the wound, and, in the absence of proper medical attention, Vick had had a bad illness, from which she was even now barely convalescent. The "pianner" was still silent at Mother Mursell's saloon, though the fair performer hoped soon to "oblige" again.

Unable to tear himself away while his sweetheart was ill, Hank had lingered at Skagway, and watched vainly for survivors of that unseen tragedy on the plateau. But neither of Dick nor Joey nor of Red Rube and his "toughs" had any news come down to the township, and the affair had long since ceased to be a nine days' wonder. "Mr. Baxter's" implication in it was not known to Hank or to the public, and his disappearance from a community among whom he had only spent three days had hardly occasioned comment. It was the general belief that he had gone to his salmon-fishery. Only

in the silence of the night, after the customers had cleared out, did his absence excite speculation at Mursell's Hotel, and then the grim proprietress always reassured her daughter's sisterly anxieties.

"Don't you forgit it! Jake ain't the boy to git left," Mother Mursell would say. "He's come out on top somewheres, I'll bet."

For the moment, however, Vick's sympathies and surmises were not for her absent brother, as she sat on a capstan at the edge of the wharf, nursing her wounded arm and a certain pet theory that had entered into her soul.

"There ain't no manner of doubt, as I'm allowin', that this yere boat might be bringing an answer to your letter?" she said to the young miner lounging at her side.

"That's how I figger it out," Hank assented. "Three weeks to England, three weeks on the back track, and a week throwed in for writing and mailing the letter. There's time for it to reach, if so be as anyone's writ."

"And if there's time for a letter to reach, there's time for people," said Vick decisively. "In my jedgment, Hank, when that wheezy

old tea-kettle bumps the wharf, we shall see some real high-toned lords scoot out of her. That pore young feller's friends is sure to come after him. They'll be wanting him for the family morseleeyum. There was a family morseleeyum—all shiny marble—in the novel I was reading when I lay sick."

"But there ain't nothin' to bury," said Hank reflectively; "and if there was, I guess they'd write for the remains to be expressed over. Besides, don't you make any mistake, Vick, my girl. That Osborne was a feller to be relied on, and he took his solemn oath he was no lord. The name he give me to write to was same as his own, and it was a Reverend Minister."

To which Vick replied by poking her tongue into her cheek and favouring her lover with a knowing wink. "You're a simple man, Hank," she said.

And then she broke off abruptly and touched her companion's brown wrist, and added—

"Here's that Gartside feller; we'd best bide mum."

The news that the steamer was coming in had spread, and the usual desolation of the wharf was broken by the collection of a score of people—some being mere idle loungers, and others longshore harpies hoping to prey on the passengers, if there were any. Among the former was to be numbered Fenton Gartside, looking on the whole not much the worse for his six-weeks' residence amid the Skagway saloons, though Vick's contemptuous reference to him was partly due to the fact that on the previous night he had broken down in his good behaviour and had helped to "paint the town red" in the company of some of the worst characters in the place.

Since his arrival from no one knew where, the relations between the English wanderer and Hank Devine had been marked by a coolness almost amounting to open enmity. On their first meeting after Gartside's return to Skagway they had eyed each other with mutual distrust, and had turned away without exchanging a word. The reason was very simple. Gartside, ignorant that Jake Mursell

had removed the paper affixed by Dick to the tree announcing his safety; despised Hank for abandoning the expedition; and, his tongue being tied by the necessity of not letting Dick's survival be known, he was prevented from asking the explanation. On the other hand, Hank Devine, who had always regarded Gartside as a disreputable loafer, viewed him now with positive suspicion. Dick's story of the hoard bequeathed to him convinced the honest miner that there might be more than drunken babble in Gartside's boasted millions—millions to which the boaster certainly had no title.

Gartside nodded to Vick, who knew him as a customer, and went and leaned against a pile of lumber. He was not particularly interested in the arrival of the steamer, because he expected neither friends nor letters. From his own people he had long been cut adrift, and sufficient time had not elapsed for him to receive a reply to the letter which he had duly sent to old Mr. Osborne announcing Dick's safety. He was angry with himself this morning for his lapse the night before; for he had been, for good reasons, trying to keep himself straight.

Presently, as the old vessel was steered warily into the shallows a cry went up that she had passengers.

"And women, too, by thunder!" yelled Vick in high excitement. "See, there's an old gal and a young 'un standing by the smoke-stack, and a feller like a N' York dude a little way from 'em."

Mother Mursell, red-shirted, and with her drab-grey locks floating in the wind, had come up behind, eager to annex possible "boarders." Since the young miner had brought her daughter back wounded from the White Pass some spark of maternal gratitude had prompted her to tolerate him—so far at least as to abstain from shooting "on sight." Hearing Vick's words, she gave a wrathful wheeze which caused them both to turn.

"Women aboard, d'ye say?" she growled, shading her eyes to scrutinise the deck of the steamer. "By Gosh! and so it is! I'm wunnerin' what's brought the likes of they to Skagway."

Gartside's ready wits divined the cause of her uneasiness, and the chance of venting his

spleen in a little ill-humoured chaff recommended itself to his mood.

"They've come to start a saloon, mother," he said. "It's more than likely they have brought a piano for the young lady to play while the elderly party in the funny hat bosses the show and does the shooting."

The gibe struck a sore point. Vick's inability to pound her battered instrument during the last few weeks had thinned out several musically-inclined customers, and Mrs. Mursell lived in perpetual fear of fresh rivals. Hitherto, not only had her saloon been the only one "fixed with a pianner," but she and her daughter had shared with an Irish miner's wife the privilege of being the only women in the settlement. She snorted, and cast an evil look at Gartside, but waited in silence for the disembarkation of the passengers.

The *Emily Jackson* came alongside the wharf at last, and the onlookers gathered close to inspect the new arrivals with an interest that had grown rapidly since feminine garments had been descried. The day was

yet young, and, as the average Western adventurer is not a bad fellow when his veins are not inflamed with drink, the majority were prepared to give Mother Mursell's possible rivals a cordial welcome.

So it was that, when the gang-plank was run out, and Aunt Rebecca, closely followed by Beryl Asquith, came ashore, half a dozen pairs of rough hands were stretched out to relieve them of the lighter articles of baggage which they were carrying. Among the would-be helpers was Hank Devine, whom Vick pushed forward with "Didn't I say? It's his friends right enough," on noting Beryl's deep mourning.

Beryl shrank a little before the wild faces and strange costumes, but Aunt Rebecca, though she looked about her curiously, lost none of her visible self-possession. She confessed afterwards that she had been well-nigh staggered by the general aspect of the squalid township, and by the obvious lack of all decent accommodation. Case-hardened traveller as she was, the hospitality proffered by the board on "Mother Mursell's Hotel," with

its bullet-starred windows and air of disrepute, filled her with foreboding. The question which was wrinkling her brow into deeper furrows was—Where on earth could she and Beryl find a decent roof to cover them?

Two persons, it seemed, were ready with a solution of the difficulty. The first was Mother Mursell herself, who pushed her way to the front and stood facing the two ladies, an incarnation of threatening malignity.

"Ye're come to Skagway in the rum bizness, eh, missus?" blustered the virago, addressing the elder of her two suspected rivals.

The unconscious humour of the suggestion came as a relief to Aunt Rebecca in the midst of her perplexities, and, without vouchsafing a direct reply, she smiled grimly. "I really think it is a woman," she said reflectively to herself, but with a puzzled glance round that elicited a chorus of rudely-expressed assent from the bystanders.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, she's a woman—a sweet pretty blossom, ain't she?" said one. "Nice motherly old party," added another. And

so on, till the object of the banter was foaming at the mouth with rage.

"If you're come here to run a saloon," she was beginning to screech, when Hank Devine, perceiving that the furious creature's hand was lurking ominously near her pistol, thought fit to interfere.

"I'll bet they're not in the rum line, mother," he said. "You're only wasting your breath. Best let her have it straight, ma'am," he added in an undertone to Aunt Rebecca. "Mother Mursell can be really nasty on occasion; she's terribly handy with her gun."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of being shot," replied Aunt Rebecca, calmly. "We have no intention of opening a public-house—if that is what this person means."

"Then ye'll be for wanting lodgings," promptly returned Mother Mursell. "When yer baggage is checked out come right over to the hotel there. I'll go and make ready." And, appeased by the prospect of taking the strangers in, the weird creature stalked away, never dreaming that she had effectively spoilt

any chance she might have had of securing them as guests.

At this point, Rupert Malahide, who had been watching the scene from the deck of the steamer, ran down the gang-plank and joined the group. An ugly triumph had shone in his eyes ever since they had rounded into the river's mouth and he had seen what manner of place Skagway was, but he controlled his features into a semblance of gentlemanly deprecation as he addressed Aunt Rebecca.

"One word, Miss Asquith," he said, indicating by a gesture that the word had better be spoken privately. Aunt Rebecca hesitated, said something in a whisper to Beryl, and stepped a few paces aside with Malahide.

"Well!" she said, sharply.

"I only wanted to offer my services," he began. "You are an old traveller, and have met with no trouble on this preposterous journey so far, but surely *as* an old traveller you must recognise that you have brought your niece to a place where a man's escort——"

"Not another word," interrupted Aunt Rebecca viciously. "We have refused to have anything to do with you hitherto on the voyage, and we want none of you now. I only consented to speak to you to ascertain what you wanted. Why, man, I will make no secret of it! We are here on purpose to thwart you and counteract your influence. Set as my niece was on coming to search for traces of her lover—I don't mince words, you see—I should have thought twice before bringing her to this outlandish place if we hadn't learnt that you were creeping off here yourself. Homburg, indeed! It is a lucky thing Beryl picked up that envelope with the notes of your route."

"Let me make a clean breast of it," persisted Malahide. "I admit that I love Beryl Asquith. I came out because I guessed this mad project was on foot, and I wanted to be on hand to watch over her. You do me a grievous wrong if you think that I undertook this journey with more sinister design than that. I will pledge myself to retire if young Osborne turns up safe, but

in the meanwhile let me assist you both. Look at these rough fellows—at this wretched collection of hovels. Apart from other considerations, I must press my service on you as a fellow-countryman in a strange land.”

“Fine words don’t butter parsnips,” snapped Aunt Rebecca, firmly. “I would rather trust one of these slouched-hatted ragamuffins than you, Mr. Malahide—after reading my brother’s diary. I’ll bid you good-day.”

Gartside, lazily watching from a little distance along the sloppy wharf, was under the impression that he had grasped the whole situation. These English folk, he told himself must be Dick’s people, come out as a result of news which must have been sent home by Hank Devine; and he began to debate in his mind how best to inform them of their relative’s safety after the assault on the Pass. He must do it, he argued, in such a time and at such a place so that Dick’s survival should not become public, for fear of danger from Red Rube’s partisans. Seeing Malahide in conference with Aunt Rebecca, he naturally concluded that they were all

of one party; and now, when Malahide returned discomfited to the steamer, he supposed that the ladies had only been temporarily deserted by their male escort while he went to look after the landing of their baggage.

Aunt Rebecca rejoined Beryl, whose alarm was yielding to amusement at the open-mouthed inspection to which she was being subjected by Vick Mursell. It was a long time since that uncouth daughter of the West had seen what she called "a real toney toilet," and it was all she could do to keep her fingers from feeling and appraising the fabric of Beryl's dress.

"Now," asked Aunt Rebecca, rather defiantly to hide her anxiety, "can anyone tell me where to find a gentleman named Hank Devine?"

The miner stepped forward sheepishly. He was irritated because politeness prevented him from resenting in the presence of the ladies the rude guffaw that broke from the "boys," and he was very nervous lest Dick's friends should blame him for his conduct at the Pass.

"We don't grow gentlemen hereabouts, ma'am; but my name is Hank Devine," he said.

Aunt Rebecca looked the clean-built young fellow over from crown to sole, diagnosed the source of his obvious discomfort, and promptly took a liking to him. "We are friends of the Mr. Osborne about whom you wrote to England," she said. "Is there any later news of him?"

An ugly sneer showed on the faces of a few of the roughs present, as Hank shook his head sadly and made the only answer in his power.

"Well, we have come out to see if we can alter that," said Aunt Rebecca cheerfully, but with a wary eye for Beryl, who was struggling bravely to bear up under the renewed blow. "In the meanwhile, Mr. Devine," the little old lady proceeded, "what about a roof to cover us? My niece and I can't possibly go to that preposterous woman's hotel, and it appears to be the only house of the kind in the place."

Vick, who had been listening with all her ears and breathing hard, cast a furtive glance round, and then whispered hoarsely so that none but the two strangers and her lover could hear—"Mother'd skin me for spoiling trade if she knew I'd spoke, but there's Parsons' frame house empty—him as went down to Juneau in the

schooner yestidday. There ain't no fixins in it, or nothing, but it's a roof, anyways."

Aunt Rebecca regarded the great raw-boned lass with a kindly twinkle in her shrewd old eyes. "This must be the young woman who tried to save Mr. Osborne, I think," she said. "Let me shake hands with you, my dear, and thank you also for trying to fit us with a place to lay our heads." And when she had grasped the girl's red fist, Beryl, too, shook hands and spoke a few grateful words; at which Vick swelled with pride to think that she had been thus greeted by those whom she had already dubbed "the lord's ladies."

Under these amenities the cloud on Hank's face lightened, and he at once volunteered to guide Aunt Rebecca and Beryl to the empty house and see if Vick's suggestion was feasible. Leaving a half-breed whom he could trust to look after their baggage as soon as it should be put ashore, he started at the head of his convoy, from which Vick Mursell judiciously detached herself before it passed the "hotel." The open door of the saloon tempted the rest of the waterside loungers, and Hank was thus left

alone to pilot the two ladies along the muddy track between the shanties. In their eagerness to learn the smallest details of Dick's doings at Skagway they missed a good many sights and sounds that might well have appalled them; though, as it was, Aunt Rebecca paused once or twice and looked back, irresolute, towards the steamer. But the distant view of Rupert Malahide watching them from the bulwarks decided her; and she stumped on, distressed on Beryl's account, and not too happy on her own.

The house of the departed Parsons proved to be little better than a rough frame-built shed, but it seemed water-tight, and, the door yielding to a kick from Hank's boot, its resources were soon explored. There was no furniture in it, but there was a fire-place, and, superior to many of the Skagway dwellings, it boasted the luxury of a floor.

"Tain't much of a place," said Hank apologetically, "but a fifty dollar bill would about fix it up to rights. If you care to trust me, I dessay I can scrape together a few chairs and a table, and I can bring down a heap of skins for

bedding. And I was thinkin'—mebbe you'll feel kind of lonesome—I could strike my tent under the pine bluff and pitch it right here, so's you'd have friendly company."

Aunt Rebecca pulled out some money with alacrity, and accepted all his offers there and then. At least they would have privacy and protection by this arrangement, and she urged Hank to go and make the necessary purchases at once. On the threshold he paused and looked back.

"P'r'aps there's a p'int overlooked," he said, hesitatingly. "Mebbe you don't want me, after all. There was a fellow as came with you on the boat—you was speaking with him at the wharf——"

"My dear Mr. Devine," interrupted Aunt Rebecca, "get him out of your head as a friend of ours once for all. He's a bad man and an enemy of Mr. Osborne's, come out here to injure him, if he is still alive. If you would serve us, tell Mr. Malahide nothing, and watch all he does."

"That's good enough," said Hank, briefly; and he strode away, soon to return with the

first batch of "assorted notions" for the comfort of his *protégées*.

In the meanwhile Fenton Gartside, lounging on the wharf and watching the steamer discharge her load of canned goods and whisky, was divided in opinion as to how he should act. Whatever the burden that lay on his soul, making him moody and boisterous by turns, he was honestly anxious to end the suspense of Dick's friends by informing them of the meeting on Lake Taku. But he was moved to hesitation by a reluctance to present his disreputable person to English ladies, the sight of whom had awakened in him a long-discarded sense of shame. And though he had every reason to believe that Malahide was of the party, he was loth to confide in him without positive proof.

"If that sleek-looking chap joins them, I shall be sure it is all right," he muttered to himself. "If not, I suppose I had better face that queer old figure in the hat, and the pretty girl. I wonder how long it is since I have spoken to gentlewomen of my own country!"

He had to wait some time before Malahide came ashore, for that astute individual was cracking a bottle of champagne with the captain, with an eye to future contingencies. When at length he came down the gang-plank and gave his valise to a half-breed to carry, Gartside followed him at a distance, and in two minutes was aware of his destination. Malahide walked briskly and with evident intention to "Mother Mursell's Hotel," which he entered, followed by the porter.

"That settles it," said Gartside; "I dare say he belongs to the ladies, but I'll tackle them first."

So it was that while Hank Devine was helping the ladies to arrange the few rude chattels which he had collected, Aunt Rebecca espied Gartside approaching. He had been to his hut to wash and tidy himself, but the operation had failed to impart an aspect of respectability. His overnight dissipation, combined with the nervousness with which his self-imposed task filled him, gave him a furtive air as he picked his way haltingly towards the shanty.

"Here, who can this be? I don't like his looks," said Aunt Rebecca, pointing him out to Hank.

"A most tremenjious bad lot," replied the miner decisively. "Little better than a corner loafer, and up to no good, I reckon. He was on a thundering tear last night, to my knowledge."

"What can he want here?" cried Beryl, in alarm.

"I shouldn't wait to find out," said Hank, who had never been able to rid himself of the idea that the drunken babble in which Gartside had indulged about "The White Ghost's" millions boded ill for Dick's venture. "I should fire him before he pitches his tale," he added. "Shall I take him on? There ain't no good in the feller."

But Aunt Rebecca herself was equal to the occasion, and, standing in the doorway, bade the intending visitor begone so forcibly that he turned and obeyed.

"I mustn't frighten them, and I suppose I *am* rather a terrible object," muttered Gartside with a queer laugh as he looked back at

the fierce little figure in the mushroom hat vociferating in the doorway. "Well, in a way it's a relief. I'll tell my story to the sleek man at Mursell's, and he can pass it on to them. He doesn't seem like a chap to be scared by bleary eyes and a stubbly chin."

He would not have admitted to himself—this strange character—that he was hurt by the rebuff he had met with. He tried to soothe himself with the cynical reflection that they would have to wait for his good news, but nevertheless the wound rankled, and it had the effect of plunging him into an impudent, reckless mood. He swaggered into the saloon door at Mursell's with a demeanour defiantly different from that with which he had approached the ladies. A Chinaman was busy "putting up drinks" for a group of customers.

"You have got a new guest, John—come by the steamer," he said. "Tell him an English gentleman wants to speak to him outside."

The loungers at the bar laughed at Gartside's description of himself, and invited him

to drink, but he waved an airy refusal and went outside and waited. In less than a minute Malahide appeared, the surprise with which he had received the message changing to a half-resentful curiosity as he saw the perky, disreputable-looking figure that came to meet him. He had hoped it was Jaka.

"You are a friend of Mr. Richard Osborne, I believe—come to search for traces of him in consequence of a report of his death sent home by a thick-skulled miner?" said Gartside. "You are with the two ladies who landed from the steamer?"

"Yes to both questions," replied Malahide eagerly. "Have you anything to tell us of poor Dick?"

"I met Mr. Osborne alive and well a week after the attack on him on the White Pass," said Gartside. "He has gone north to the Yukon on the business that brought him out. There are with him a stout, shifty-looking beggar called Baxter, one of his carriers who survived the fight, and a brace of Indians who are thoroughly reliable. He ought to come through all right."

A quick spasm of rage crossed Malahide's face as he recognised Jake Mursell in the description of Baxter, and scented treachery to his own design. He saw what had happened. His hireling assassin had thrown him over in face of the temptation to secure the gold hoard—probably after some proof that it really existed. It was only with an effort that Malahide controlled his face.

"Tell me everything, my dear sir," he said. "You have already placed Osborne's friends under a heavy debt of gratitude."

And at greater length Gartside described the meeting on Lake Taku, recounted what he had heard of the attack and of Hank Devine's part in it, and vouched for Blue Lightning's capacity to guide Dick safely to a successful issue. But he was silent as to his own previous knowledge of Shrimpton and of Dick.

Malahide heard him without a break to the end, striving the while to fathom the motives and capacity for evil of this strangely-met waif. It was his way to be ever looking for new tools, conscious or innocent; and he

concluded that this one had better be placed for the present in the latter category.

"You have acted with excellent judgment in keeping all this dark," he said. "It would never do for the bad characters in this wild place to know how their boon companions had been handled by Osborne and his friend Baxter. And there is another precaution which we had better take. The ladies of my party are rather excitable—one of them especially. They would not guard this secret an hour, and hard as it may appear I should be inclined, in Osborne's interest, not to take them into confidence just yet. Do you see what I mean?"

Gartside nodded, greatly relieved. "Now that I have told you, I have shunted the responsibility," said he. "Put an end to their suspense in your own way, at your own time. I'm no lady's man, and shan't go near them."

"Good!" said Malahide. "Now come in and refresh; I should like to know more of you."

Hank Devine, trudging by, laden with a packing-case which was to be the table of

Aunt Rebecca's establishment, saw them go into the saloon together. But any emotions that were forming in his mind at seeing Gartside and Malahide in company were dispelled by the apparition of a red-headed, bull-necked man, who suddenly came round the corner of the building and followed them in.

"By Gosh!" murmured the astonished miner, as he resumed his way, "if that ain't Rube, come back at last! There's going to be trouble!"

CHAPTER XIII.

JAKE'S "CONSOLATION STAKES."

DICK let the slab of rock fall back over the empty hole, and gazed from one to the other of his companions. Blue Lightning grunted and said something in an undertone to Star-Eyes, who gravely shook her head. Joey the carrier looked frankly unconcerned, and Jake began to talk volubly—so volubly and so close on the heels of the discovery that had Dick believed it possible for him to have removed the gold, he would have suspected the words of having been prepared for the occasion.

As it was, whether "Mr. Baxter" had stolen the plan or not, there were two arguments against his having stolen the gold. In the few hours that they had been on the Klondyke no one man could have shifted the hoard accumu-

lated by Shrimpton ; and, had that been possible, he would certainly not have returned to camp. The wild mining-town known as Circle City, then in its infancy, was only some forty miles further on. The culprit would have fled thither, with as much as he could carry of his plunder, and thence down the Yukon to St. Michael's and the sea.

Yet Jake's sympathetic ravings were a little overdone, and nearly brought him to grief. "I'm sorry for this, Mr. Osborne, and all the same I'm glad—downright glad!" he shouted. "I regret your disappointment; I rejoice at my own acquittal; but above all, knowing your good heart, I grieve for your shattered faith in a friend. That man, Gartside, who sneaked off to Skagway, has done this. You saw how he jumped at the chance to avoid coming—you saw——"

The interruption was due to the click of the magazine of Blue Lightning's Winchester, as the chief shot a cartridge into the barrel. Jake, turning quickly, was confronted with the deadly tube levelled at him from not six feet away.

"You make more bad talk about Gar'side

I blow roof of head off," said Blue Lightning gravely. "Gar'side heap better man than you."

Any honest emotion came as a refreshing breeze to Dick at that crisis of doubt and suspicion; and, though far from being assured of Gartside's innocence, he felt grateful to the old warrior for championing an absent friend.

"Come," he exclaimed, with a thrill of satisfaction at the beads of terror that stood on Jake's brow, "we shan't find the hoard by wrangling. Lower your rifle, chief; and you, Baxter, had better not bring accusations that you can't back with proof. We shall be more profitably occupied in looking for the fresh gold which Shrimpton said was to be won hereabouts. Perhaps the White Ghost repented of his gift to me, and his spectre came back for it. Let us go down to those creeks; they seem the sort of place for a find."

Star Eyes sighed gently at the passing of the trouble, for her grim parent threw his rifle into the hollow of his arm and altered his scowl for Jake into a smile for Dick. "Young pale-face chief speaks wise words," he said. "Blue

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Lightning's blood runs too hot sometimes. This place bad medicine. Let us go."

From the summit of the bluff they had a wide "bird's-eye" view of the rushing Klondyke and its tributary creeks, some of them—mere rivulets—hemmed in and boiling between shelving banks, others broad watercourses, lazily guiding their shallow flood to the parent stream. Hank Devine, had he been with them, would have pronounced that silver tracery of rock-stemmed water to be a prospector's paradise, replete with infinite possibilities.

Too dazed by the sudden overthrow of his hopes to try to form any definite plans, Dick felt the necessity of impetuous action, and with feverish eagerness led the way down the slope. He regarded the episode of Shrimpton's hoard as closed—someone had forestalled him; it did not much matter who—and all he cared for now was to wrest from Nature a substitute for what he had lost by man's guile. If he could only hit on the creek from which Shrimpton had mined his wealth, he might, after all, only have to write off as a bad debt the time and labour to be expended in washing out a new fortune.

Crossing the flats below the bluff he found a certain amount of relief in consulting Blue Lightning and Star Eyes on the nature of the country round, whether they would be able to supplement their supplies with enough fish and game to enable them to stay some weeks, and what was the very latest they would be able to remain before winter closed in and drove them away.

At first Jake followed meekly behind with Joey the carrier, as though either sulky or chastened in spirit at the rebukes administered to him. But when those in front began to discuss ways and means for getting out of the country—whether down the Yukon *via* Circle City and St. Michael's to the sea, or upstream back to Skagway—he pricked his ears, and presently ranged alongside.

"Circle City is on the American side of the boundary, is it not?" he asked, with only a show of casual interest.

Star Eyes shot a keen glance at him, and took it upon herself to answer. Her reply was complete even to diffuseness, and gave a good deal more than the information

required. It embraced clear directions that would have enabled anyone to go to Circle City across the intervening forty miles of wilderness with very little difficulty.

Jake put a few more questions, more or less relevant to the discussion of their future plans, but all on the basis of an exodus *via* Circle City. He was particularly inquisitive about the stern-wheel steamers plying thence to St. Michael's, and the ocean-going boats that connect the latter port with the Pacific coast. Dick, beginning to feel a strange elation as they neared the river, found it in his heart to chaff this man whom he disliked.

"You have evidently made up your mind that we are to go back by sea, Baxter," he said. "Confess that you funk those rapids."

This man was a man of moods to-day, for he turned sulky again. "One doesn't shoot rapids *upwards*," he said resentfully.

"No, but one has to portage the boat past the rapids, and that would hardly suit a chap of your figure," persisted Dick. "That is, if you weren't too busy cooking the dinner, or doing fancy needlework, to lend a hand."

Again Jake's mood seemed to change, and he broke into a hearty laugh. "You are rough on me, Mr. Osborne," he chuckled. "You must remember that, though I may have shirked the hard work of the trip, you wouldn't have been here to-day if I hadn't had a soft heart at the White Pass."

Jake's oily smile even more than his words conjured up the picture of the five ruffians sinking into the chasm. Just so had he smiled after detaching the pine-stem; and, shuddering at the reminiscence, Dick strode on without reply. He would have given much to have convicted his smooth-tongued companion of the treachery of which he knew he was the victim, and it irritated him to be perpetually reminded of a service which he was beginning to think might not have been disinterested.

Having satisfied his geographical curiosity, Jake fell back without any protest against Dick's coldness. The country through which they were passing was carpeted with a dull brown moss, which as they neared the river level took a greener tint. Here, too, the

giant mosquitoes reasserted themselves—as usual, singling out the two white men for their prey, and evoking loud and frequent curses from the afflicted Jake. For some reason best known to herself, Star Eyes was moved to quiet smiles by his noisy wailings, and once as she glided gracefully at her father's side she touched the silent warrior and spoke a few words in their own tongue.

Suddenly they came upon a rocky gulch, along the bottom of which a brook splashed over a sandy bed towards the river. A few solitary firs had found root - hold on the rugged slope of the little ravine, and close down by the streamlet the soil changed to a clayey gravel on which there were no traces of vegetation. The Indian Joey had brought a couple of spades in case it should be necessary to dig for the *cachet*, and taking one of them, Dick descended to the brook.

"From what I read of placer-mining on the voyage out, this looks a likely spot," he said. "Come, Baxter! now's the time to retrieve your character for laziness. Take the other spade and set to."

Making a wry face Jake submitted, and for half an hour the two men scooped holes in the gravel, pausing now and again to wash a little in their drinking-cup, but finding no trace of gold. At the end of that time Jake threw down his spade and said that he was ill.

"I have got a touch of fever," he groaned. "With your permission, Mr. Osborne, I should prefer to return to our camp and get some quinine. There is some among the stores, I think."

At the moment Dick was keenly scrutinising the deposit at the bottom of his tin cup, where something glittering had caught his eye. It was only a tiny particle, vanished among the sand as soon as seen, and in his efforts to re-discover it he answered absently:—

"Oh yes; cut along, by all means, and dose yourself."

Jake took him at his word, and instantly began to clamber out of the gulch, but before he had gained the top it dawned on Dick that he had made a mistake. Though

Shrimpton's hoard was missing, this man was still open to the suspicion of having stolen the original plan, and there was the possibility that he had some sinister design in separating from the party. He was about to call him back when again the glittering particle came to the surface of the sand in the cup, and this time it stayed there. With a thrill of rapture, he knew that the alluvial soil, in greater or smaller quantities, contained gold. There was no knowing what a further search might reveal.

Absorbed in his discovery he let some minutes pass in examining the yellow speck, and when next he looked up Jake was lost to view. Instinctively he turned towards the Indians, who, with the apathy of their race for precious metals, had watched the operations from a little distance with but slender interest. Blue Lightning was gazing in the direction of Jake's disappearance, Joey was squatting on his haunches half asleep, while Star Eyes seemed to be watching Dick with an intelligent appreciation of his difficulty. As he caught her eye she rose

from the rock on which she had been sitting and came forward.

"You are afraid that he has gone away for no good," she said. "Try and trust us Indian folk, Mr. Osborne—you will not be sorry. Let my father follow him unseen, and watch that he does no harm. Blue Lightning is first-rate on the trail."

The warm blood was mantling under the girl's brown skin, and her eyes met his, straight and true. Since the disappointment of the morning his mind had been full of suspicion for everyone, but the pleading wistfulness of this Indian maiden, who had made her quiet influence felt through the toils and dangers of the long river journey, took him by storm and drove his doubts away. It might not be wise to let two members of the expedition out of his sight at this juncture, but he would risk it rather than wound the girl. And had he not found gold!

"Thank you, Miss Star Eyes," he said; "your notion is a good one. Will you explain to your father what is wanted?"

She turned and spoke a few rapid words in the guttural Sioux dialect to Blue Lightning, who nodded a solemn comprehension and picked up his rifle. In another minute he, too, had vanished from the gulch, and Dick Osborne was free to prospect the Klondyke "dirt" again.

But, though he enlisted the services of Joey to unaccustomed spade-labour, and spent the next six hours in digging innumerable holes, he met with no great success. Yet every now and then the cup yielded a grain or two of gold at long intervals, and he was able to hope that he might stumble on the spot whence Shrimpton had wrested his treasure. Star Eyes showed no interest in his proceedings, though when he stopped work to snatch a mouthful of the day's rations which Joey had brought out, she joined him and chatted freely about her life at the Red River Mission.

Having thoroughly prospected the gully, Dick tried several of the nearest creeks with varying results, but still without finding ground worth working systematically. Enough

traces of gold were brought to light, however, to confirm the auriferous nature of the country, and to warrant the opinion that somewhere among those solitudes lay hid a fair share of the gold of the world. Dick determined that on the morrow he would have the scow moved higher up the river, so that, with his camp close to the scene of labour, he could extend his researches.

This being settled in his mind, his suggestion that they should return to their present headquarters for the night was received with satisfaction. Joey had long since begun to tire of his work, and Star Eyes had shown an increasing restlessness as the day wore on, which Dick had attributed to her father's absence, and which gave place at once to an air of silent composure when they set out for the camp.

Guided by the bluff whereon Dick had suffered such a blow in the morning, they had no difficulty in striking their own trail, and after a toilsome but uneventful march over the ankle-deep moss they neared at

length the inlet where the scow was moored. On topping the head of the miniature ravine that led down to their improvised landing-place, the first sight that caught Dick's eye was Blue Lightning. He was sitting outside the shelter which he had built for his daughter, his long-stemmed pipe between his knees in full blast; but of Jake Mursell there was no sign. At the approach of the trio the chief rose and spoke a few words in his own language to Star Eyes, who, to Dick's astonishment, broke into ringing peals of laughter in which there was more of joyous relief than merriment.

"What is it?" he asked, bewildered. "Where is Baxter—down there in the scow?"

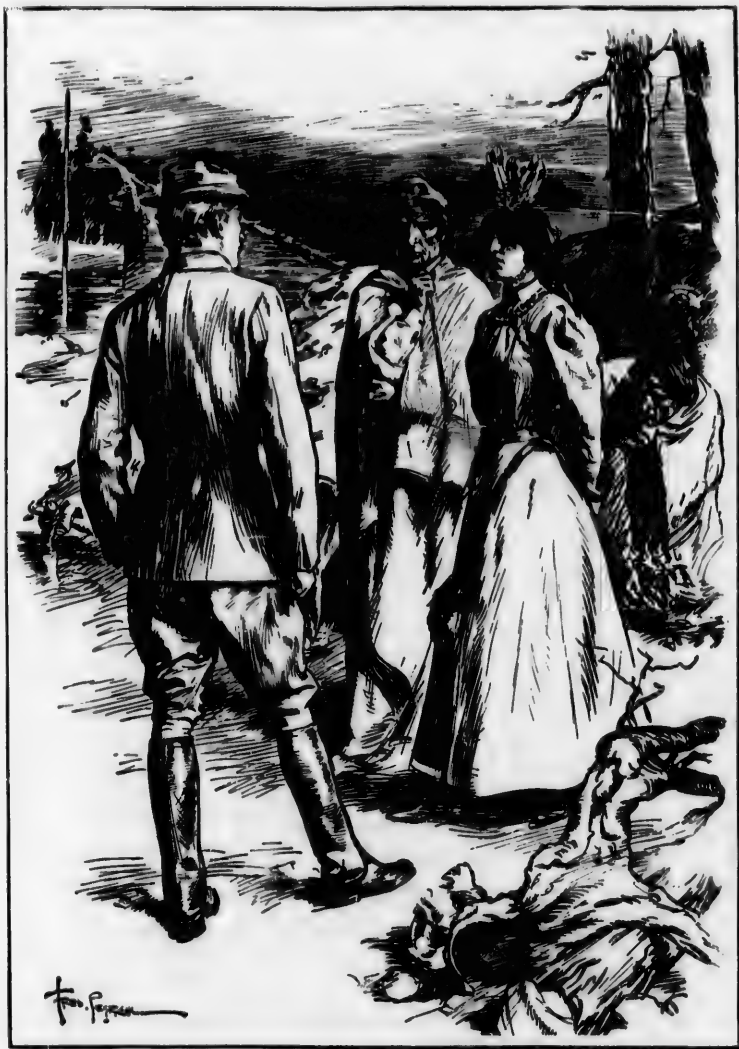
Blue Lightning cast an affectionate glance at the queer craft with its thatched deck-house, which was his floating home.

"Bad man no sleep in scow again," he replied. "Trail him back here; then he take all his things—much as he could carry—and make tracks for Circle City. I follow on trail to make sure—five mile—then I

come back to camp. Thief pale-face gone for good; we never see him any more."

Dick flushed with sudden anger. What guarantee had he that the erstwhile salmon-packer had not gone off on some sneaking errand connected with the stolen hoard? It might very well be that Circle City was his ultimate destination, but might he not first visit some secret spot to which he had contrived on the previous night, when they were all asleep, to remove the gold? It was to prevent such a contingency that he had been loth to let the man out of his sight, and he opened his mouth to upbraid Blue Lightning for his breach of trust.

But Star Eyes touched him on the arm in time to check the outburst. "Do not blame my father," said the girl, proudly. "He has served you well, and will still serve you. In this business of the gold *cachet* all that he has done has been my doing, and now that that man has gone, Mr. Osborne, let me end your trouble. It was I who moved that gold from under the stone."



"DO NOT BLAME MY FATHER," SAID THE GIRL PROUDLY" (p. 242).

"You!" was all that Dick could utter in his amazement.

"Yes, and it is safely hidden for you not ten miles from here at a place to which I will take you," proceeded Star Eyes; "you need not fear that Baxter has gone after it; it is not on the trail to Circle City. Why did I do this? your face asks. To save Mr. Gartside from a temptation that he himself feared might be too strong for him, and at his request. Come, while Joey builds a fire, I will tell you the story, so that you shall think better of your friend and of us Indian folk."

Too dazed to grasp more than the bare fact that Shrimpton's legacy was intact, Dick could only murmur vague thanks and follow Star Eyes to the *débris* of last night's fire, which the carrier quickly lighted. For once Blue Lightning abandoned his imperturbability, and, while Joey tossed driftwood on the blazing pile, sat drinking in his daughter's words. She told in crisp short sentences how she had overheard Gartside's scheme for bargaining with Shrimpton, and how, from

the suspicion thus engendered, she had warned the sick man not to confide in the Englishman fully.

"And then," she went on, "after the White Ghost had left us at the settlement to return to England, when I could see that Mr. Gartside was still worrying about the gold, I told him what the sick man had told me as I tended him on the scow. I said that it was true that Shrimpton had made a *cachet* of the gold that he had found; and that, as he had no hope to live to enjoy it, he had made a plan of the place on the back of a picture so that he could give it to a man in England who had been kind to him. The picture was that of the man who was to have the gold, if he took the trouble to come out for it.

"When Mr. Gartside heard this, I could see that for some reason he was very sorry, and he said in his strange way:—'Star Eyes, will you save me from robbing an old friend?' And then he told me that he had searched the White Ghost for a plan of the *cachet*, and had found it. The picture was one of a young man who had saved his life at college in England,

and now that he knew that the gold was meant for his preserver he did not wish to take it. He had made a copy of the plan—it is the one I gave you yesterday—and to end his temptation he put it into my charge. I was to keep it for three years, and then if you did not come out to claim the *cachet*, he thought he would be fairly entitled to it.

"In the spring, after the melting of the ice, when we were again upon the Yukon not far from here, he came to me and said: 'Star Eyes, that gold of the White Ghost's draws me like a magnet, and I believe I could find it without the plan, for all the figures are burned into my brain. I dream every night that the spectre of the sick miner is beckoning me to go and take it. Will you once more save me from myself, and move the gold to a new *cachet* where I cannot find it?'

"Again I agreed to help him, and while my father hunted the moose in this district I hid the gold in a fresh place, going out to the work many nights, for there is a great weight of it, and I carried it to a distance. So not even Blue Lightning knew of the new *cachet* till now, and

Mr. Gartside, lest he should be tempted to watch me, went away to Circle City for a while. It is certain, Mr. Osborne, that the gold is still safe where I put it."

The many revulsions of feeling to which he had been subjected in the last few hours had shaken Dick more than he knew, and this last one, with the touching addition of his old chum's hardly-tried constancy, well-nigh unmanned him. He felt that he could never forgive himself for the suspicions he had harboured on the strength of Gartside's manner at their meeting on Lake Taku. That strangeness was now fully accounted for by the fear of having to explain why the gold had been moved, and Dick well remembered how it had vanished when it was settled that he should go to Skagway instead of accompanying the expedition.

"How came you to suspect Baxter?" said Dick, when he had found words to thank his dusky guardian-angel. "At least, I suppose it was suspicion of him that made you keep back this good news so long?"

"Yes, that was why I dared not spare you

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this morning's trouble," said Star Eyes, gravely. "It was Mr. Gartside who warned me. When he came up through the trees from the lake to your camp he saw Baxter feeling the pockets of your coat, and, knowing of the plan that you would have with you, he guessed Baxter might be after it."

"He didn't get it on that occasion," said Dick. "If he stole it, it must have been afterwards—on our journey down the river. I have racked my brains to think how the plan could have been taken from me, and the only chance I can remember to have given was when I was dog-tired after that last portage on the Lewes. I slept like a log for ten hours right off."

"Bad man, very fat, but he step like panther," commented Blue Lightning, sententiously.

"Well," Star Eyes proceeded, "I tried to act wisely, and I said in my mind—If Baxter is after the gold, he will leave us and make for Circle City when he finds the *cachet* empty. Then only will it be safe to tell of *my cachet*. Last night he went to the place; and knowing he could do no harm I did not have him stopped when he stole out of the camp. To-day

when he asked so much about Circle City I knew that I was right, and that, being a lazy man, he would not wait to dig for gold he might never find. I told my father to follow and make sure that he was really gone, and, that being so, I spoke out."

But the gentle Star Eyes with all her kindly shrewdness could not be aware that the "fat bad man with the step of a panther" had another string to his bow besides the hoard which his cunning had missed. There was still Malahide's blood money to fall back upon, and, dreading his ruthless employer as he did, he simply dared not go back with his mission unfulfilled. It would have been otherwise had he been master of the fabulous sum which he had been led to expect when Hank Devine's talk with Dick, overheard whilst lurking round their camp on the Pass, caused him to change his plans and treacherously rid himself of his former allies.

He had intended to use Dick as a guide to the *cachet*, get possession of the gold by stratagem to be devised later, and then fly to some new land where he could enjoy his wealth

under a changed name. As it was, he had not the means to escape from the long arm of the man who could send him to twenty-years' penal servitude; there was nothing for it but for him to return and be content with Malahide's reward—a reward which certainly would never be paid if it were not properly earned.

It was just how to properly earn it that was occupying his serious attention, as he sat munching some of the parched corn he had brought from the scow, at a point about three miles from the riverside camp. He had known quite well that Blue Lightning was shadowing him, and as soon as the chief had abandoned the trail he had come warily back on his tracks to within easy distance of his prey. Jake Mursell was a soft-living man who valued a whole skin, and he found himself face to face with a problem; but he arrived at a solution at last, and lay down to mature it in the moss.

So it happened that, about the darkest hour of the long twilight that constituted the summer night, a black shadow flitted again among the willows fringing the camp, and dodging to the rear of the rough *tepe* in which Star Eyes was

sleeping, worked down towards the moored scow. In ignorance of any need for watchfulness, and fatigued with the labours of the previous day, the whole party slumbered soundly, intending to be up betimes for an early visit to the new *cachet* in the morning. Blue Lightning was stretched across the entrance of the *tepe*, and Joey was huddled close to the dying embers of the fire.

Twenty minutes passed in silence, save for the lapping of the stream as it eddied into the inlet; and then a great cry arose from the scow—a cry of mingled anguish and despair, so weirdly horrible that Blue Lightning's fingers trembled as he sat up and grasped his rifle. The cry sounded unearthly to the old chief—"bad medicine."

Possibly that was why the two shots which he discharged in quick succession flew wide, and the black shadow, seen only for a moment, vanished among the trees.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE WAR-PATH.

TILL far into the small hours of their first night at Skagway, sleep was impossible to Aunt Rebecca and Beryl Asquith. The sounds of revelry from the saloons and low gambling haunts were sufficiently disquieting; and when, shortly after midnight, some roysterer on his homeward way playfully emptied his revolver in the air, the elder lady fairly broke down and wept.

"I am a wicked old woman to have allowed you to come," she cried. "I have been in some wild places about the world, but this beats everything. My child, I ought to have been firm—to have insisted on coming alone."

But Beryl, pale and frightened as she was, soothed her, showing how cruel would have

been the waiting at home while Dick's fate was in doubt. And then Hank Devine came to the door of the shanty and reassured them—for, true to his word, he had moved his tent to a vacant space opposite—and at last the two tired women slept.

In the morning Aunt Rebecca rose very grim and stern, and determined that her overnight's exhibition of weakness should be her last. What troubled her most was that there seemed to be no immediate scope for the energy she was burning to expend. Her object in undertaking the arduous journey had been, primarily, to put an end to Beryl's suspense, and secondly, when it was discovered that Malahide was proceeding to Skagway, to protect Dick, by warning or otherwise, if he had survived the fight, from his rival's schemes. The importance of someone performing this duty was amplified by the post-mark on the envelope picked up by Beryl. The mark being the same as that on the letter received by Mr. Osborne from Devine, the deduction was that Malahide had a correspondent in the district where Dick had so unaccountably met with deadly enemies.

Could it be that the unkempt stranger whom she had driven away the day before was 'a tool of Malahide's? she wondered, as she made her toilet before the cracked bit of looking-glass that had been one of Hank Devine's first purchases. The man was English, the miner had said, and was a bad character. That was at least a partial confirmation of the theory, and she began to regret her hastiness in not according him an interview. It would have been wiser, she recognised, to learn his professed object, and in so doing, perhaps, to gain an inkling to his secret one.

Having finished dressing, Aunt Rebecca left Beryl still asleep on her pile of skins and went outside, shutting the door of the shanty behind her. In the course of all her travels, a more dreary prospect than Skagway in the early morning had never disgusted her critical eye. Except a couple of lank-haired half-breeds loping to their work at the wharf, there was no human being in sight. A few hungry dogs nosed amid the offal that had been thrown into the street. A clinging mist had driven in from the Lynn Channel, covering the slushy flats

with a pall from which only the nearer cabins and hovels stood out with any distinctness. The broken bottles strewn everywhere, and the silence, were in curious contrast with the rowdy noises that had kept her from sleep. They invested the place with an atmosphere of stale sinfulness, suggesting that all Skagway had to do in the daytime was to recover from last night's orgy in order to prepare for the next.

The one redeeming feature in the squalid landscape was, to Aunt Rebecca's eyes, the tent which Hank Devine had pitched opposite. Its weather-stained canvas and ragged flaps afforded a sense of security, which was increased as the young miner himself, his vigilance aroused by the shutting of the door, appeared in the entrance. His good-humoured face cleared somewhat as he saw the old lady, but it still bore traces of anxiety while he bade her a cheery "Mornin', ma'am."

"I'm feared you and Miss Berr'l ain't slep' partic'lar sound," he added. "The boys was a bit on the bust last night. They didn't offer to come a-nigh your place, though. I was ready for them if so be as they had."

It was fortunate that Aunt Rebecca had "seen the world." If this had been her first trip to the Western Continent, she would probably have pulled out her purse and alienated this good friend by bestowing a largess upon him. As it was, she knew enough to reply—

"You are a good sort, Mr. Devine. Your being at hand was a great relief, though it wasn't very pleasant for my niece. Is Skagway always so lively at night? Or was it a special occasion?"

Trivial as the question sounded, it seemed to exert some strange influence on the workings of Hank Devine's brain, which, though shrewd enough, was not a fast piece of mechanism. He knitted his brows, and, before answering, appeared to be bringing all his mental weight to bear on the knotty point.

"The boys are always middlin' rampageous," he said slowly, and then added decisively: "I didn't see it that-a-ways afore; but now you mention, I can tumble that there might have been a kind of special

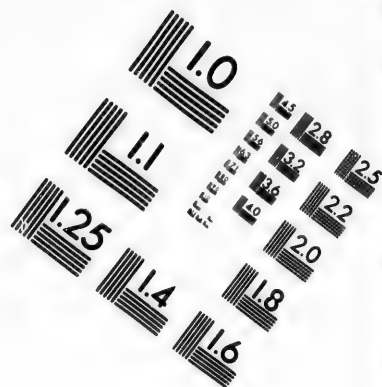
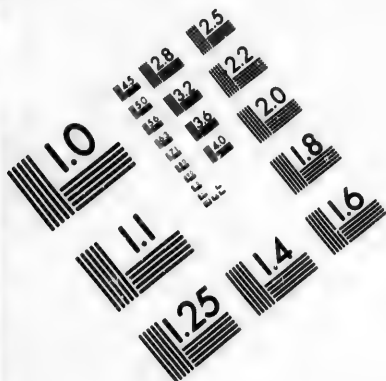
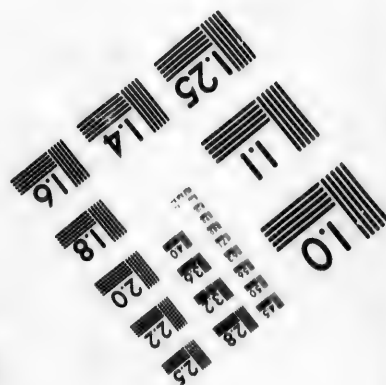
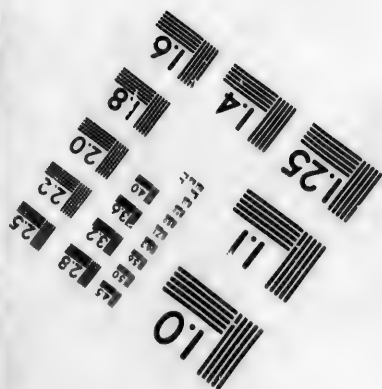
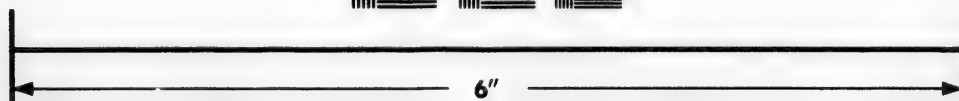
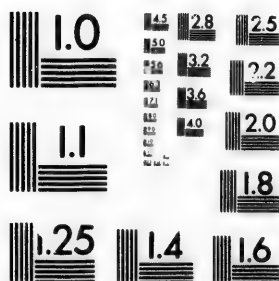


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racket last night. It brings me to speak of somethin' I spotted yesterday—somethin' as I allowed I wouldn't let on till you and Miss was rested. Red Rube's back to Skagway."

"What! one of the wretches who attacked our poor boy?" cried Aunt Rebecca, horror-struck. "Can't we apply to the police—the Sheriff you call it, I think—and have him arrested at once?"

Hank peered through the mist for possible listeners.

"It don't do to shout that kind of talk here, ma'am," he said. "The Sheriff of Skagway is about the biggest old tough in the township, and no manner of use to honest folk. We must play our own hand in this game. And I wasn't thinking of the Sheriff. What you put in my mind to say was that I saw that low feller, as wanted speech with you, in the company of Malahide yesterday. They went into Mursell's together jes' like brothers. And then Rube came along, and went in after. I guess someone was standing liquor to celebrate Rube's

return. And that was what put the devil into the boys last night."

"Couldn't you have made sure—by going in and mixing with them?"

"My place was right here, I reckon—alongside of you ladies," replied Hank, looking hurt at the implied reproach.

Aunt Rebecca readily admitted that they would have felt uncomfortable without him, and was reassured to hear that he had taken steps to be informed of what had occurred at the saloon. She was proceeding to consult Hank how best to ascertain Gartside's relations with Malahide, when the miner touched her on the arm, and then placed a cautionary finger on his lips. The figure of of a man was looming through the fog.

"It's that same cheap lot himself," whispered Hank, as soon as Gartside was near enough for recognition. "He's making for your cabin, seemin'ly."

Stepping forward resolutely, Aunt Rebecca tackled the supposed adversary. The crape and trimmings of her mushroom hat hung limp in the reeking air, and her shrunken

face was more corpse-like than usual; but her tone, full as ever of sharp command, and her erect little form, startled Gartside into a nervous halt.

"You were going to my house?" she said, indicating with a dignified gesture the miserable hovel opposite.

"I was about to make another effort to see you, madam," replied Gartside, recovering himself. "Can I have a word with you in private?" This with an ugly glance at Devine, who was eyeing him contemptuously from the door of his tent.

"Yes. What is it?" said Aunt Rebecca, moving a little aside so that their voices should not disturb Beryl, and throwing a friendly nod and a shrug towards the miner, both of which hurt Gartside badly, and nearly sent him away with his word unspoken.

"Only this," he replied, not wholly restraining the aggressiveness that her attitude towards him called up—"only this, that Dick Osborne, in whom I think you are interested, is my good friend. When you refused to

receive me yesterday, I came to speak to you about him."

"Humph! you *sound* like a gentleman," said Aunt Rebecca, making a stodgy failure of trying to tap with her ebony cane on the mud of Skagway. "What of Dick Osborne?"

"The news I came to bring you was that he got through that scrimmage on the Pass all right," said Gartside. "I met him three days later on Lake Taku. He went on, all well, and, with luck, should be due back here any time now. At his request, I wrote home to his father an account of his safety; but you must have left before my letter reached."

"Good gracious! but I am sorry I was rude to you," cried Aunt Rebecca, promptly spoiling the effect of her apology by adding doubtfully: "if this is true."

Gartside's sense of humour had a battle with his annoyance, and he broke into one of his queer laughs.

"Hang it all, but you might make it easier for me," he said. "It required some resolution to face you after that rebuff. I

shouldn't have made the attempt if your quite reasonable distaste for my appearance hadn't led to what may prove an awkward mistake—for Dick."

And he proceeded to relate how, being under the impression that Malahide was one of the party—an impression fostered by Malahide himself—he had imparted to him the secret of Dick's survival; how, as the day sped on and Malahide abstained from going near the hut where the ladies were lodged, his suspicions were aroused; how they were increased, if not confirmed, by seeing Malahide scrape acquaintance with Red Rube, the notorious ruffian with whom rumour associated the attack on Dick.

"If I have done the gentleman an injustice, please write me down an ass, and think no more about it," he concluded. "What chiefly moved me to seek you out was his anxiety that I should keep my news of Dick from you. When I came to think it over, it seemed too unnecessarily brutal to be the act of a friend."

In her conflict of emotions, Aunt Rebecca

was making such horrible grimaces that Gartside could not judge whether he had done right or wrong; but she soon put the matter at rest by calling to Hank Devine.

"This gentleman is a friend, after all," she said, as the miner joined them—his face a picture of amazement at her reference to the whilom suspect. "I am getting silly in my old age. It was all my fault that he was in that scoundrel's company."

"That so?" replied Hank, thawing but slowly.

But when the news of Dick's safety was repeated to him with Gartside's reasons for jealously guarding the secret which had been so unfortunately divulged to Malahide, he jerked forward a sinewy hand.

"You and me've got to shake, Mister," he said.

But it was the Englishman's turn to assert himself. Drawing up his slight figure with a dignity that was in ludicrous contrast with his attire, he kept his hands in his pockets.

"Pray don't run away with the notion that *you* have been cutting *me*," he replied. "Why

did you desert my friend Mr. Osborne, and send home a misleading report about him, when you must have known from the letter he nailed to the tree on the plateau that he was all right, and gone on? I don't blame you for bringing the girl back here first; but you might at least have followed Mr. Osborne, and abstained from harrowing his people, when you had clear evidence of his being alive."

"As God is my judge, there was no letter on the plateau when I searched it," murmured Hank hoarsely. "I'm not that kind of man."

There was no mistaking the genuine ring in the assertion, and it carried Gartside's quick wits back to the plausible white man whom he had found with Dick, and mistrusted at sight.

"I believe you," he said, "but I am not altogether glad to do it. The abstraction of that letter points to foul play—makes me fear that Dick Osborne had other dangers ahead of him. Do you know a man named Baxter who travelled up in the same ship from Victoria?"

"Yes, and didn't cotton on to him," replied Hank.

"Well, perhaps you will be surprised to hear

that he was with Osborne—about to go the trip with him—when I met them. He seems to have appeared in a mysterious way in the middle of the fight, and to have disposed of most of the assailants by a trick. I didn't cotton to the chap either. He must have removed the letter. And it looks ugly."

"I'll bet 'twas him," said Hank, clasping the hand which Gartside now offered him. "I'd rather have been accounted a liar than hear he was in it."

Aunt Rebecca, who had been chafing while the two men adjusted their silent quarrel, was now much perturbed at this discounting of Dick's probable safety. But her eagerness to be enlightened as to "Baxter," was cut short by the sound of running footsteps. A moment later Vick Mursell, bareheaded, damp, and breathless, emerged from the mist and joined the group.

"There's a heap to tell about that English feller up to our place, an' Red Rube," she began. "I've shaddered 'em better'n a detective in a dime novel. An'——"

"Git in there with you, then, and bide still,"

whispered Hank, unceremoniously pushing his sweetheart into the tent. "Here's the galoot himself comin' up street. He mustn't see you along of us."

His keen eyes had caught sight of Malahide, easily distinguishable by his dress, advancing from the opposite direction, and he was only just in time to conceal Vick's presence.

Picking his way towards them through the slush, Dick's rival could not repress a frown at seeing Gartside with Aunt Rebecca; but he raised his hat to the latter with his usual politeness, the salute being received with the customary frigid glare. The sight of him, however, after his attempt to hush up the news of Dick, was too much for her, and she broke into a torrent of abuse.

At the sound of her aunt's voice, Beryl, who in the meanwhile had risen and dressed herself, appeared at the door of the cabin.

"Don't be alarmed, my child. I was only giving this person a piece of my mind," cried the old lady, running to her. "What do you think he——"

But Malahide, who had already guessed

from Gartside's presence that there had been a hitch in his programme, adroitly forestalled her.

"I came out early to give you something better than a piece of my mind, Miss Asquith," he said, with just the right amount of latent irony. "I had very good reasons for not divulging it yesterday — in Mr. Osborne's interests; but let me be the first to break it to you. There is cause for hope that he is alive and well. As I see that I am persistently misjudged, I will not intrude upon you further." And showing no sign that his hand had been forced, he vanished in the fog.

No sooner was he out of sight than Hank dived into the tent and produced Vick Mursell. The girl was trembling with excitement, and had evidently had much ado to restrain an impulse to rush out and accuse Malahide.

"What have you larned, my gal?" asked her lover. "Don't give us the trimmin's. Jes' sling out the pith of it."

"That Mallyhide is a reg'lar down-east

sharp," she answered. "He's took up with Red Rube, and bought 'en a horse. So much I got by speerin' and listenin' yesterday. And this morning early he started Rube, a-horseback, out along the plank road to the Pass. They was talkin', talkin' ever so cunnin', up to the saloon afore Rube cleared out, an' I couldn't catch nothin' of it but, 'Will they come sep'rit, or together?' says Rube. 'Sep'rit, most like, seein', as I reckon, one's been bestin' the other. But, sep'rit or together, you must settle 'em both ef you want what I've promised,' says Mallyhide. 'Pears to me Rube's gwine to lay for that Englishman on the Pass—an' someone else 'swell."

After what had transpired, Vick's information called up no surprise; but it was valuable, as showing the need for prompt action. Dick might be expected any day, and it was imperative that he should be put on his guard. So much was in the mind of everyone. And when Hank broke the silence that followed, it was with the practical suggestion :

"There'll be someone layin' for Rube, I guess. I'm main glad I can trust the ladies with you, Gartside, for I'm off to the Pass on the war-path. It'll be that schemer at Mursell's you'll have to mostly watch for; but don't forget to shoot if anyone vexes them."

And half an hour later he was on his way to the mountains, taking only his arms and enough food to last him three days. In passing through the canyon he caught a glimpse of a horse tethered among the rocks at the foot of the cliff, within rifle shot of the dangling rope; and having, no doubt that Rube was camped there, he avoided the direct route up the precipice, and, by dint of a long climb, reached the higher level unseen. Then he pressed on over the Pass and camped a little below the summit on the other side.

CHAPTER XV.

A USEFUL ROPE.

To Aunt Rebecca, and to Beryl when she had been assured of the truth of Malahide's forced information, the fact of Dick's safety from a known danger eclipsed for the moment their anxiety about one that only threatened. Gartside took possession of Hank's tent, and, having been put at his ease, exerted himself to lighten, so far as he could, their experience of a "frame-built township." It helped greatly to instil a dawning sense of self-respect in the wanderer that Beryl remembered hearing Dick often speak of him in his college days, and he touched the women's hearts by his evident enjoyment of being treated as a friend.

In the meanwhile, Malahide, fuming at

the defection of Gartside, and at a loss to account for it, awaited the result of his dispositions in no enviable frame of mind. There was no certainty how long he might have to wait for Dick's return from a twelve-hundred mile journey open to so many mischances, and the hard fare and rough life on the riverside flats irked him. After twenty-four hours of Skagway, he was in a hurry to have done with it all, and find himself amid the luxuries of his own mansion once more.

But that could not be till he was certain that his ends had been accomplished; and there were other grounds for uneasiness, besides the possibility of Red Rube missing his aim. It was not unlikely that Dick Osborne would return to civilisation *via* St. Michael's, in which case the lurker on the Pass would wait for him in vain. Against this theory there was to be placed Gartside's presence in Skagway, and Dick's natural desire to see his friend on his way home. But still, to a man who never left anything to chance if it could be helped, the outlook was sufficiently disquieting. Moreover, there

was Jake Mursell to be reckoned with—the faithless Jake whose treachery, described to him in lurid language by Red Rube, had driven all his plans askew.

The steamer that had brought him was still lying at the wharf, and, having purchased the friendship of the captain, he spent most of that day and the following night on board. But the next morning the boat was due to sail, and Malahide's reprieve from the miseries of Skagway came to an end when her bell rang for departure. Shuddering at the prospect of days, and perhaps weeks, at "Mother Mursell's Hotel," he descended to the sloppy wharf and watched the steamer work her way down the river, with a sinking at his heart that was new to it.

He was about turning away, in despair how to kill time, when another steamer rounded into the river, and, passing the outgoing one, headed for the wharf. Malahide at once decided to wait for her arrival; and when he learned from one of the half-breed loungers that she was *from the north*, his idle curiosity gave place to active interest. It

was just possible that one, or both, of the men upon whose arrival his stay in that squalid hole depended had come down in her from St. Michael's.

Recognising the importance of not being visible if Dick was on board, he stepped behind a stack of lumber whence he could see without being seen from the steamer's deck. There were a score of passengers clustered in the bows, miners going south from the Circle City diggings; and, with his binoculars, Malahide eagerly scanned the row of rugged faces, without finding those he sought. Then, sweeping his focus to the afterpart of the vessel, he saw Jake Mursell standing apart, and *alone*.

Malahide shut the glasses with a sigh of relief, and drew back so that he could take the unconscious Jake more completely by surprise.

"This is better than having to deal with two at once," he muttered. "And—who knows?—perhaps Jake, in playing his own hand, has played mine too. The rascal! To think that, with my grip on him, he has dared to put me second in the game. I wonder whether he

has gained the prize that tempted him to throw me over."

But there were no signs of increased prosperity about Jake as he came ashore. Indeed, he looked much the worse for wear both in body and in clothes. Nor were there any signs of his employer's recently expressed sentiments as Malahide stepped up behind and clapped him on the shoulder, saying—

"Well, Mursell! I have come out to look after you, you see."

Jake faced round, gone white about the flabby gills, but he managed to keep his facial muscles and his voice under control.

"You positively made me jump," he said, with a tentative smile that broadened as he found no trace of anger in Malahide's eyes. "Couldn't you trust your humble servant to put the job through, despite appearances?"

"Is it put through?" said Malahide.

"It is," was Jake's reply.

So pregnant were those two words with fateful meaning that the pair walked on a few paces in silence, Jake instinctively turning his steps towards his mother's saloon. Very soon

Malahide perceived this, and, abandoning the triumphant train of thought that the other's news had called up, halted in the muddy track. He had not acquainted Mother Mursell with the fact that he knew her son, and he had his reasons—very special reasons—why she should not see them in company. He guessed, from his assumption of a false name, that Jake was not known by the limited Skagway public to be related to the saloor-keeper.

"Look here, Jake. I want to be posted in exactly what has occurred," he said pleasantly. "There are complications. Two of Osborne's womenkind are here, and I am more or less on my defence. How was it that you did not follow up that letter with a further account? Where have you been all this time?"

The question was a great relief to Jake, who was in dread lest Malahide should have met Gartside and learned—as indeed he had—of his thwarting Red Rube's attack, after instigating it.

"I have had a fearful experience," he replied. "That business on the Pass was bungled, through no fault of mine. I had to go on with him down the Yukon before I got my chance."

"Poor Jake! I expected something like that would be it," said Malahide kindly. "There was no gold, eh?"

"Not a grain," replied Jake. "We found the place right enough; but if the gold was ever there, someone had lifted it." And he could not quite restrain the anger from blazing up in his eyes as his thoughts went back to the empty *cachet*.

"I knew that would prove a cock-and-bull story," commented Malahide, noting, but ignoring his emotion. "And now, Jake, I have only been here a few hours, and I cannot stay. I should like to go in that steamer and get back to England. You had your breakfast on board ship, I suppose? Well, then, I was going to propose that you should come straight out to the Pass with me and show me the ground where that fight took place. There is a miner named Devine foregathering with the women I spoke of, and, under his tuition, they make allegations which I must be able to rebut."

Jake was only too eager to oblige; and when he came to think of it, a direct

approach to his mother's saloon did not recommend itself to him. While he had been on his travels, Red Rube might have returned to his usual haunts, and his one hope was to get into and out of Skagway without meeting the desperado. Had it not been for a couple of spare suits of clothes which he had left at the "hotel," of which he stood in sore need, he would not have landed at all.

Turning into the miry waggon track that skirts the river towards the Pass, he sought to set his mind at rest on that point.

"You must be staying at the old girl's shop," he said to his companion. "Do you chance to have noticed a red-headed man, name of Rube, among the customers?"

"Yes," was the reply. "He's in there now, I think. Why do you ask?"

"It's part of my yarn," said Jake, hastening his steps and casting a nervous glance at the saloon. "He was the chief of the boys I engaged for that affair—the only one who came out of it alive."

"Indeed!" returned Malahide, gnawing

his moustache to prevent the snarling chuckle that curled his lip. "He seemed to be an uncommonly hard case. I understand he was at Skagway looking for someone who had bested him."

"That would be Osborne," said Jake, in a faint, thin voice that belied his words. And again he quickened his pace so vigorously that for the first half-mile he had no breath for his promised explanation.

Malahide, with his full knowledge from Gartside and Red Rube of what had happened on the plateau, made no attempt to hurry it. Indeed, what Jake might say had but little concern for him after that brief reply to his first, all-important question. Rather were his thoughts occupied with how best to reap the most sure and swift advantage from the tardy deed done by his recalcitrant tool out in the wilderness. And as for the tool himself—well, old tools that had done their work indifferently were best thrown away.

He was well equipped for walking, was this cynical employer, and he looked down

with amusement at the broken boots that testified to the truth of his companion's travels. At every step the pasty mud squashed in and out of the gaping seams with a wheezy sound that kept time with Jake's plethoric breathing. They formed a curious contrast—the tall, well-clad man in knickerbockers and stockings, and the short, threadbare one, whose sole object seemed to be to place the greatest possible distance between himself and the murky doorway of his mother's saloon. In still greater contrast were both of them to the scarce-trodden waggon track on which they were the only travellers from the straggling hovels behind to the majestic solitudes of the mountain Pass ahead.

Since then a few short months have made all the difference. So many strange beings throng the dreary riverside road that the sense of contrast has been lost. Weird humanity, drawn by the gold which, five hundred miles beyond that first mighty barrier, had brought these two to the spot, has swamped the face of Nature.

At length Jake slackened speed and began his tale. In one salient fact, and in one important omission only, did it differ from the actual truth. He said nothing about the confirmatory talk about the gold which he had overheard while prowling round Dick and Devine's camp on the Pass, and he changed the personality of the man who had dislodged the trunk bridge.

"During the night," he said, "I crept over from the other side of the chasm on to the plateau, and laid up among the rocks, so as to get a chance to cut the rope. But they guarded it so closely that I got no show till after the firing began and Devine and the girl had gone down. Then I managed to do the trick, unseen by Osborne, who was engaged in returning Rube and company's fire. I thought we had got him fairly crabbed, and the boys started to rush in on him over the trunk, when—would you believe it!—the young beggar cleared the decks at a sweep, by tipping the log into the hole while they were crossing. Rube dropped his gun down the chasm and clambered back,

but, being unarmed, he skedaddled among the boulders.

"As I was now in a minority, I had to do the best I could for myself—and for you. Osborne was in a shooting mood, but I got him to believe that I had come out on purpose to warn him. And since he was bent on pushing on, I gammoned him into letting me go too. I took the precaution to pull down a letter he nailed to a tree saying he was all right, so that I might have him all to myself up yonder, which was why Devine didn't follow.

"On the lake he fell in with a couple of Indians, and we went north with them—the most ghastly trip you can imagine—shooting rapids and bumping rocks till, honestly, I wished I could chuck it. But there was no choice. I had to go on till I was near enough to Circle City to quit the country that way, for I could never have made my way back up the river to this end alone, even if I had had a boat."

"Yes, but what about the finish?" asked Malahide, gauging the fast lessen-

ing distance to the mountains with a critical eye.

"The finish? Ah, yes—the finish," replied Jake, with an involuntary shudder. "It came the night after he discovered that he had been on a fool's errand. I kidded them that I had done a bolt for Circle City, and then I crept back. He was sleeping on a sort of covered raft, the Indians being ashore, and I stole on board. He woke just as I was going for him, and put his knife into my shoulder, but I settled him right enough. Then I had to run the gauntlet of that cursed Indian's Winchester, and only escaped by a miracle. In three days I was at Circle City, and came down by the next boat. How's that for zeal? Haven't I earned my reward?"

"Oh, yes, most faithful servant, you have earned your reward. Never fear but what you will receive it!" said Malahide. "So it was on the very day when the *cachet* was found empty that you got your chance? Singular!"

There was a note of irony in the tone that seemed to spray Jake's spine with a *douche* of ice-cold water, and he halted irresolute.

"It's gospel, what I'm telling you," he whined. "Why are you bringing me out here?"

"Don't be a fool; I have given you my reason," replied Malahide; and, the stronger nature prevailing, Jake went on again, babbling of the hardships he had suffered and of the delights of seeing the Strand once more. But now and again he cast a furtive anxious upward glance at the tall man striding at his side, and once or twice his cunning eyes dwelt curiously on his patron's lithe form as though taking the measure of it—with a view to eventualities.

So at length they came to the foothills of the Pass, and after another hour's climb from the termination of the road entered the gloomy box canyon which was blocked at the upper end by the sheer scarp of cliffs. It devolved on Jake, from his previous experience of the route, to act as guide, and he pointed out with unction the dangling rope, giving access to the plateau above, and long since restored to its original position. In pleased remembrance of his wily Prowess in cutting off Hank Devine's return, he forgot his nervousness, and bragged of the

exploit as they stumbled upwards over the broken ground.

"It's a useful rope," said Malahide dryly, looking about him searchingly among the rocks on either hand.

Again there was a metallic ring in the commonplace words that filled Jake with the strangest sensations, but before he had time to analyse them he was thrilled with a fresh one about which there was no doubt. He was transfixed with terror. Red Rube had stepped out between a couple of boulders, and was standing ten paces away fully in the path. At sight of Jake the big ruffian's face was convulsed with fury and his rifle butt flew to his shoulder.

"I've brought you one of them, Rube, you see," said Malahide, with the air of having arranged a pleasant party. "I shouldn't shoot, though, if I were you. He seems to take quite a pride in that rope. Wouldn't it—eh?"

Growling like some savage beast, the desperado assented, and keeping his rifle levelled, advanced on the trembling wretch, whose cries for mercy began to resound among the rocks. Jake Mursell might as well have appealed to

the looming sides of the canyon as to the flinty hearts of those who quickly had him in grip. In a trice the pistol which he feebly tried to draw was knocked from his quaking hands; Rube was upon him like an avalanche, and he was dragged, whimpering now hopelessly, to the foot of the precipice, where the rope hung gently swaying in the mountain breeze two feet off the ground.

A minute later it tautened, and a hoarse laugh went echoing down the canyon.

CHAPTER XVI.

MOTHER MURSELL IS MATERNAL.

RED RUBE and Malahide stood callously watching, and presently the latter said:—

“There will be no need for you to stay out here longer; I have had news of the other one—the right sort of news. You will be paid just the same.”

“Then, boss, I guess I’ll cut that carrion down and sling it into one of them holes,” replied the desperado. “It’s only a lynching job—payin’ him out for what he gone done to my mates—but it might raise a muss to leave him there.”

But he had only carried out the first part of the proceeding when the sound of voices wafted from the plateau high above their heads caused them to step back among the

boulders and peer upwards from their hiding place. Malahide had no mind to be found in such company, living and dead, but Rube reassured him. The voices were probably those of coastwise Indians returning from the Lakes, or at most of "boys," who would think nothing of such a trifling incident as the taking-off of Jake Mursell.

A moment later it seemed that Rube's surmise was to be verified, for an Indian slung himself over the brink by the rope, and began to descend. His progress was slow, for he was laden with great packages of moose hide, girt about his body, the evident weight of which made it difficult for him to secure foothold, aided though he was by the rope.

"Didn't I say!" exclaimed Rube. "He's only a Siwash carrier, totin' peltries for some galoot that's been hunting, back to the Lakes."

Malahide watched the struggles of the Indian with careless amusement. Nothing mattered much to him now that he had gained his end in making that wild journey;

and he was prepared to enjoy the remainder of it as a harmless tourist, trusting to time and opportunity to secure his ultimate purpose. And then, chancing to look higher, to where the tall pine overhung the brink, he saw that he had not gained his end after all. Grasping the rope, and making ready to follow the Indian down the cliff-side, was Dick Osborne, alive and well, and also heavy laden.

Realising that Jake had either lied to him or bungled his work, Malahide cast a furious glance at his dead instrument, that would have brought him to life again for the wreaking of a second vengeance had it been possible. Then, recognising that the game was still on the board, he set himself to play the card that he had "readied," thanking his stars that it was still available. The card was Red Rube's Winchester.

"See there?" he whispered. "There's been a mistake. There is Osborne coming down. You must shoot him, and I can't afford to have you miss, mind. We can take the carrier afterwards. That will be the gold they're bringing—curse him!"

"I guess I'll hev to show, to make sartin, but that won't matter as there's on'y them two, and we're gwine to settle them both," said Rube. "And I'll hev to wait till he's further down afore I kin draw a bead on him proper."

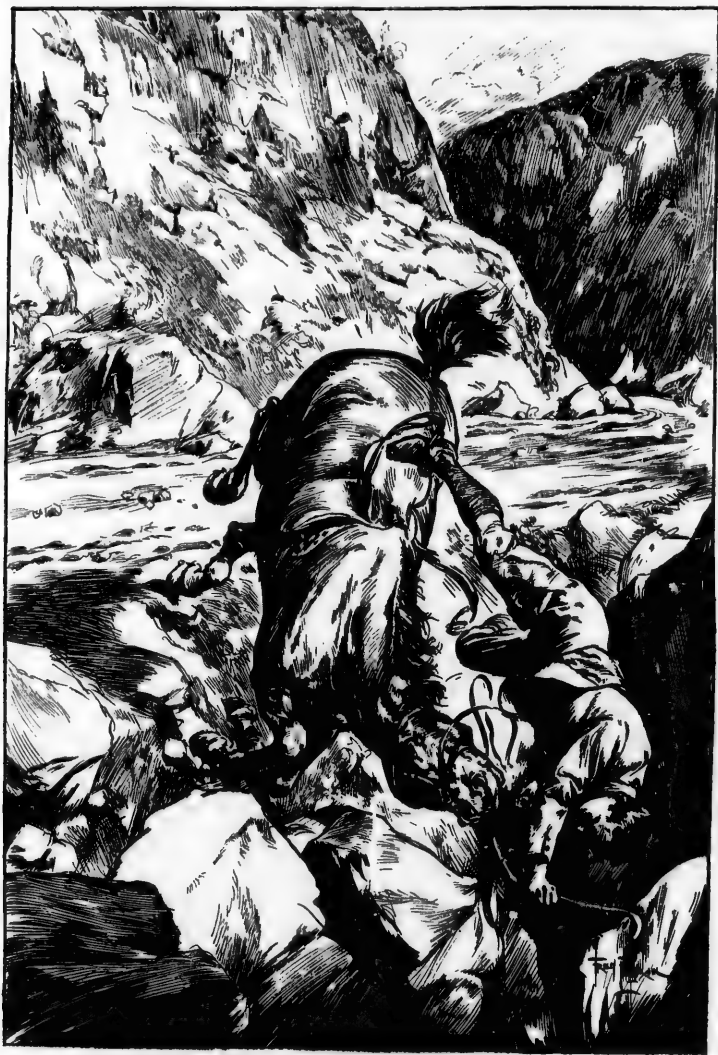
"Do it your own way, so long as you *kill*," breathed Malahide.

The prospect of gold-plunder, in addition to his promised reward, fired the murderous ruffian to use his best skill and caution. As he had said, in order to put in a sure shot it would be necessary to leave the shelter of the boulders and draw nearer to the foot of the precipice, and, curbing his eagerness, he waited patiently till Dick was so far down the rope that there was no chance of his reascending to safety in the improbable event of a miss. Malahide fretted at every moment's respite allowed to the two swaying figures, but he saw the force of his companion's argument.

"I calculate I kin fix him now," said Rube at length, and he advanced into the open hollow of the canyon. Malahide,

watching his every motion from the cover of the rocks, saw him halt twenty yards away and raise his rifle to take deliberate aim. But before the butt reached his shoulder the weapon fell clattering to the ground, and Rube spun round twice—slowly, like a top that has run its course—while two smart reports from the level of the plateau, but away to the left, whence a flanking fire was obtainable, explained his antics. As he toppled over, stone dead, Hank Devine and Blue Lightning rose to their feet on the brink above.

Then only did Malahide recognise that he had lost the game. Abandoning the first mad impulse to rush forward and use Rube's rifle himself, he ran to the horse, on which his hireling had insisted as a means of escape, and sprang into the saddle. Those two stern figures, the white man side by side with the red, upon the plateau, with their smoking rifles at the ready, warned him that in swift retreat lay his only chance. And the chance might have come off had not the smell of powder and the results of his



"HORSE AND RIDER FELL AMONG THE JAGGED ROCKS" (p. 289).

own unerring aim filled Blue Lightning with the lust of blood.

"Shoot the horse!—not the man," cried Hank, as the chief raised his rifle again. For a moment the old warrior hesitated, then his muzzle sank a little and spoke, sending its messenger into the raw-boned mustang's flank. In a crumpled heap horse and rider fell among the jagged rocks, and both lay motionless, while Hank and Blue Lightning, followed by Star Eyes, descended to join Dick and Joey the carrier at the foot of the precipice.

That same afternoon, during a lull in the trade at Mursell's Saloon, the proprietress and her daughter were having a discussion about the absent Jake, consequent on a rumour brought in by one of the customers that "Baxter," the salmon packer, had been seen on the wharf that morning in the company of their English guest.

"Ef so be as it's true as Jake's to Skagway, and they two was together, this Mallyhide must be the galoot as sent Jake

out. He ain't on visitin' terms with that old cat up-street, anyways, as came by the same boat to look after him as you call the lord in yer foolishness," said Mother Mursell, seating herself on an empty case by the door, while Vick rinsed glasses at the counter. "Ef you hadn't shoved yer finger in the pie there'd a' been none of this muss; Jake 'ud a' arnt his dollars a month back and no trouble. What yer do it for, gal?"

"I ain't sweet on killin' folks—leastwise in cold blood," replied Vick. "When I stood in that passage there and heard you and Jake reckonin' it up that first night he came here, I'd a' gone straight and told Osborne ef it'd been any but my mother and brother as was up to sech wickedness. As 'twas, I did the best I could."

Mother Mursell sighed reflectively—whether over her daughter's unfilial conduct in thwarting the family interest, or over Jake's mysterious absence, there was nothing to show. The latter, probably; for presently she growled: "Where they've got to licks me—ef it *was* Jake. I'm kinder fond of that

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boy, and it 'ud hurt me ef so be as he'd passed our saloon for one of they low places further up."

"Where there ain't no pianners," said Vick, glad to humour her mother, but with a pensive look at the battered instrument—silent now so long because of her wounded arm.

"You ain't let on to that Devine feller o' yourn that he as called himself Baxter was kin to us?" asked the old woman after a pause.

"You bet I didn't; I should a bin too mighty 'shamed for Hank to know Jake was my brother—ef he'd bin spotted along of that Red Rube crowd."

"Devine ain't been hangin' round here this two days—since he's took up with they Britisher women," remarked Mother Mursell thoughtfully. Her cunning old mind was busy with every possible combination that might threaten her missing offspring, and was evidently calculating whether Jake was likely to find a friend or foe in her daughter's lover. Perceiving which, Vick remained discreetly -

silent. In fact she was confronted with a sudden source of anxiety. Thoroughly in the confidence of Gartside and his English *protégées* "up-street," she was well aware that Jake had been with Dick Osborne after the attack, and though she could not account for her brother's change of policy, she naturally suspected him of evil designs. She knew also that Hank had gone out to the Pass to safeguard Dick back, and in doing so he might find himself in conflict with her rascally brother. She more than half regretted now that she had not told Hank of the relationship, for if the supposed "Baxter" met with harm at his hands there would be an end of their courtship at least.

"It 'ud be a funeral instead of a weddin', I guess. Mother'd plug him for sure ef he'd hurt Jake," was her thought, as she glanced at the terrible red shirt, the iron-grey locks, the hard old face, and above all the pistol holster framed in the doorway.

But it was not Jake Mursell, as we know, who was to suffer for the family pride which had kept this rough diamond from confiding

fully in her lover. And surely among all the strange kinks that Dame Fortune has knotted in her chain, one of the strangest was that which made the life of Mr. Rupert Malahide, ex-money-lender, millionaire, and owner of Glastonford Abbey, depend on the finer feelings of the sister of his murdered tool. For it is doubtful if Hank Devine, much as he loathed Malahide, would have let his tongue run quite so freely in the next half-hour had he known who "Baxter" was.

Presently Mother Mursell rose to her feet, and shading her eyes looked along the waggon-track which Malahide and Jake had trod side by side in the morning.

"Prospectin' outfit comin' in—two white men and three Injuns," was her comment on a still distant party that was toiling along the river flats. "'Pears as if they've struck it rich, too. They're all loaded up heavy, 'cepting one of the Injuns—and by thunder, that's cur'ous. The one that ain't loaded is a squaw."

At this Vick came over and joined her mother in the doorway. With quick in-

tuition, her mind reverted to the beautiful civilised Indian girl whom Gartside had described as being with Dick's party; and allowing for Hank to have joined them, the numbers and description tallied—if in truth Jake had been seen in Skagway that day. Soon she recognised her lover's stalwart form, and, with a thrill of delight scarcely less keen, that of her friend, "the English lord." Mother Mursell's older eyesight and smaller interest failed to serve her so well.

"D'yer make 'em out?" said she.

Now from the moment of seeing the party, Vick had set herself the task of making matters smooth for those whom she had taken under her wing, and she grasped at once the fact that the situation was dangerous. If, owing to Hank's warning, Red Rube had come to grief out on the Pass, his associates might make trouble so soon as the news spread, while if the desperado himself was alive, it would be even more necessary to take precautions. Especially was she anxious on behalf of Aunt Rebecca and Beryl, little better than prisoners in their wretched hovel

—the “’ristocrats” who had not been too proud to shake her by the hand.

“I make out one on ’em to be Hank. Guess he’s met t’others, and is guidin’ ’em in,” she replied, adding very demurely: “Trade ain’t very brisk. I reckon I’ll fetch a shawl and run and meet the boy. Mebbe I kin steer the crowd into this old saloon.”

The business inducement secured assent, and Vick sped into the house for the shawl, which was only an excuse for not going out by the front way. Leaving by the back entrance, she dodged among the log cabins and tents till she arrived, breathless as usual, at the shanty where Gartside was leaning against the door-post chatting to the ladies within.

“Tell ’em to come along quick. You and me’ll tote the baggage to the wharf,” she panted. “The steamer as came in this mornin’ ain’t gone yet, and they’ll be best aboard. The lord’s on the plank road, bringin’ in his pile, along of Hank, and I want to stop ’em off from comin’ into the town. There’ll jest be time ef they start right now.”

Gartside saw the value of the recommendation at once, and, thanking his stars that he had no hysterical subjects to deal with, put his head into the door and repeated Vick's news. In the nature of things the two women had to waste a minute in kissing each other; but that over, no time was lost. Everything had been kept ready for a hurried departure, and in five minutes Aunt Rebecca and Beryl were on their way to the wharf. Vick led them round at the back of the saloon, and had the satisfaction of seeing them cross the steamer's gang-plank while the heavily-laden party was still two hundred yards away on the riverside road. Dick's cheer and Hank Devine's imitation war-whoop told that there was no need to divert the travellers from the perils of the town; but Vick and Gartside went out to meet them, while Aunt Rebecca and Beryl waved welcoming handkerchiefs from the steamer's deck.

With a clear conscience now, as well as the knowledge of good service rendered, Gartside was able to look his old friend in the face as

they met. Shake his hand he could not, so hampered was Dick with heavy moose-skin packages. Nor, for the same cumbrance of wealth, could he find a square inch on his back to slap; but his welcome was none the less frank and hearty, and won evident approval from Star Eyes, who stood smiling shyly in the rear. Hank Devine, Joey, and Blue Lightning also were too heavily laden for more than verbal greeting, but the twitching muscles in the old chief's face at the sight of his young fellow *voyageur* were eloquent of grim joy.

"Good old Dick! So you have pulled it off?" cried Gartside. "Here, let me carry some of your parcels. How d'ye do, Star-Eyes? How do, Blue Lightning? Well done, Devine! Your servant, sir, though you have the advantage"—the latter to the grinning Joey. "But where is the fat, oily man—Baxter?" he chattered on, hardly waiting for replies. "You found him a wrong 'un, I expect, and shunted him out of the select circle?"

"He was certainly a scoundrel," said Dick

gravely. "He tried to murder me up yonder, and came south by St. Michael's, we think, under the impression that he had succeeded. He stole on me in the dark; and after I had made him scratch with a wound in the fleshy part of his arm, he ran his knife into what he thought was my heart. But I had rolled over, and the only sufferer was the pile of skins on which I had been sleeping."

For the safety of the ladies, it had been decided to keep secret as long as possible the fate that had befallen Red Rube. So Dick said nothing of the ghastly sequel to "Baxter's" crimes, which they had nearly interrupted that morning when they were preparing to lure Rube into just such an ambush as he had himself laid.

So it was that the stars in their courses fought against Rupert Malahide, cursing with a broken leg among the boulders of the Pass till help could be sent to him. For, after the revelation of Jake's attempt at murder, Vick felt that never, even to her lover, could she own the relationship; and through her silence, it was weird help indeed that reached the wounded villain during the coming night.

To describe the meeting on board the steamer, with all its babel of explanation and congratulation, would call for much vain repetition, the reader having been alternately with Dick Osborne and the two brave women who came to seek him throughout their most salient adventures. The boat was to sail in an hour; and as there were plenty of vacant berths and a good-natured skipper, there was no trouble about engaging passages and storage in the vessel's strong room for Dick's "pile."

And a pile it was upon which the whole party, not forgetting the faithful Joey, feasted their eyes before the door was locked! Shrimpton had packed his specie in assorted sizes. Some of the packages contained nothing but nuggets, ranging from the dimensions of a pigeon's egg to those of a cricket ball. Others were stuffed with golden grains like shelled corn, while many were filled with yellow dust of finest particles.

"I think it must fall a little short of poor Ned's computation, but it has taken four strong men to carry it over the Pass, and anyway there's more than enough to free the Hall thrice

over," said Dick, as hand in hand with Beryl he turned to follow the others on deck, for it was time for farewells to be spoken.

And then, somehow, the question arose, Why should farewells be spoken at all—at least, just yet? Gartside is to be suspected of having started the suggestion—slyly, and with malice aforethought—though it was never clearly traceable to him, and Beryl, who had taken a great fancy to Star Eyes, was the first to give it words.

"Why shouldn't all you people who have been so good to us come down to Victoria and say good-bye there?" she said. "It seems dreadfully mean of us to be sneaking away like this, the moment we have got the plunder."

"I am old enough to play propriety to you young folks," said Aunt Rebecca, after her blunt fashion, "and if I have my way, you won't need anything of the sort coming back. There are clergymen at Victoria, Mr. Devine, and you'll have to wait a long time before you catch one *here*," she added, with a pretended frown at the blushing Vick.

"Mebbe we cud give mother the slip," said

that maiden coyly, but with a nervous glance over the wharf to the saloon.

"We kin have a darned good try," replied her lover resolutely.

"There is gold on the Klondyke? I mean you haven't cleaned it all out, Dick?" said Gartside, who had been having a whispered conference with Star Eyes and her father.

"Tons of it," was the reply; "we tried the wrong side of the river first, but after we found the second *caket* all right, we looked round a bit, and on the creeks to the south of the river struck what our friend Hank would call 'pay-dirt' at every step. I have given him the reversion of the place, and he's going up after winter."

"Well, then, if he'll have me, I'll go with him," said Gartside; "but first Star Eyes and I will come down to Victoria with you, and hunt that parson. One can hardly wander about the wilds with a lady who has promised to be one's wife. And, of course," with a grimace at the unmoved Blue Lightning, "my prospective father-in-law will have to come and give his daughter away."

So it was all settled, Joey needing no persuasion, and as it was settled it befell. Mr. and Mrs. Devine, with Gartside and his beautiful Indian bride, were the first to peg out claims on the new gold-field in the following spring, and so well had they selected their localities that they were back again in civilisation and "passing rich" before the news of their discoveries caused the subsequent rush.

But this is looking ahead; we are not clear of squalid Skagway yet. The steamer's bell had rung, and the hawser was being cast off, when Mother Mursell, wildly gesticulating, was seen running from her saloon to the wharf. Vick cowered behind the funnel, while Hank prayed for the swifter uncoiling of the stiff rope from the shaky bollard. The gang-plank had been withdrawn, and the furious woman did not arrive till there was a yard of clear water between the vessel and the shore. She could only mouth and spit.

Dick dived his hand into his pocket and produced a fat nugget which he had reserved as a specimen, and flung it to her. She

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clutched it and grinned feebly, beginning to move off.

"By Jove! it's our last chance; we've forgotten about Malahide," cried Dick, suddenly remembering his stricken enemy. "You know her lingo better than I do, Devine. For God's sake tell her to send people to see after that wretched man on the Pass."

Hank was equal to the occasion, and unfortunately for the owner of Glastonford Abbey, sought to improve it.

"Mother," he shouted, "comin' through the Pass we lit on your guest Mallyhide and Red Rube—in cump'ny. They'd jest hanged that Baxter feller as was here in the spring of the year. Rube and Baxter needs buryin', but Mallyhide's got a broke leg. Someone oughter to go out and 'tend him. Top of the box canyon he'll be."

Mother Mursell's furrowed face was contorted into a series of emotions which most on board thought meant pity.

"Mallyhide's killed Jake?" she cried back. "Then I guess I'll go and 'tend him myself." And, as the steamer sheered off, the last

sight which the group on deck had of Skagway was that of the red-shirted woman striking into the riverside road towards the distant mountains.

All but one of them wondered at her knowledge of the dead man's Christian name. It was only Vick who knew why her mother, trudging along the flat, kept taking her revolver from its holster, petting it and patting it affectionately.

THE END.

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